

FRISKOLEN 70

An Ethnographically Informed Inquiry Into the Social Context of Learning

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Abstract

The debate surrounding the introduction of computers into the schools raises a number of philosophical issues that themselves have nothing to do with computers. I take advantage of this situation to engage in a form of radical questioning, to examine certain prevalent notions and assumptions about what education is (or ought to be), about the relationship between teaching and learning, and most of all, about what sort of human situation or social context enables full engagement with the world.

To lend a degree of immediacy and richness to this discussion, I describe and analyze, from an ethnographic perspective, a small free school in Copenhagen, Denmark—*Friskolen 70*—where I lived for eight months. I use this particular human community, which is a school more in name than in actuality, as an “object-to-think-with.” Through examining just what type of a place it is, we will come to terms with what such abstract concepts as “structure,” “authority,”¹ and “freedom” mean, as they relate to learning in the stream of life.

Thesis Supervisor: Seymour A. Papert

Title: Professor of Media Arts and Sciences

In Memory of

John Holt (1923-1985)

George Dennison (1925-1987)

Two men who died while this work was in progress, who would have played a more direct role in it had not cancer intervened, and whose spirit and ideas inform its every page.

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Foreword and Acknowledgments

A CLOSE FRIEND OF MINE, when reading a draft of this document, wrote the following comment in the margin: “Aaron, if you’re so down on school, what are you doing at M.I.T. writing a doctoral thesis?” This was her polite way of saying something along the lines of, “Why, you hypocrite! There you go again, trying to blast school out of the water. Have you forgotten that you’re in one?? If you think schools are so bad, what in the world are you doing at M.I.T.? Isn’t this the most blatant of contradictions?”

In fact, I do not see it as a contradiction. I had basically one reason for coming to M.I.T.: I wanted to work with Seymour Papert. Having spent the previous years studying the impact of science and technology on human affairs, as well as mathematics and computer science, and given my interest in children and learning, I was excited by the ideas that Seymour was kicking around. He was asking the types of questions I wanted to ask: Why do most people avoid mathematics and science like The Plague? What can be done about this? How will people cope in an increasingly technological society if they are alienated from science and technology? What happens to the wonderful powers for learning, which small children so obviously have, after children get to school? Why do so many get turned off to so many things? Why can’t we let them continue what they were doing? Can we imagine a point in time when school as we know it would disappear, would simply not make sense? What would such a society look like? How might technology play a role in forming such a society?

If I am “down on school,” it is not principally due to my own schooling, most of which (though by no means all) was quite positive. I want also to say that, although I am quite critical of compulsory schools, I do not blame school people—teachers and administrators—for the state of that institution. Teachers are not meanies; they do not wake up in the morning, rub their hands together and say, “Heh, heh, heh. Let’s see... How can I alienate my students today?” What keeps teachers from calling conventional school practices into question, I believe, is partly a lack of imagination, but mostly the reality that teachers themselves feel alienated—alienated from their students, from themselves, from their work—within a large, bureaucratic system. In many ways, teachers are just as trapped as children.

I look back on my own schooling with some degree of regret. Again, my school experience was far from dismal, but I now recognize how much of it was a waste of time, time that could have been spent doing things I really cared about, finding and pursuing my real interests, instead of merely coping with the demands of school. There were, luckily for me, times when my own interests and the demands of my teachers coincided—these were happy, rewarding times. I may have in fact had more of these coincidences than most people. But there were certainly times when the opposite was true, times when the demands of school created a fierce and painful struggle in myself: a feeling of guilt that I did not want to be a “good student” and do what the teacher wanted me to do, while knowing at the same time that that’s what I ought to be doing. It never

occurred to me at the time to question the legitimacy of the institution itself. School was school—how could it be different? I now regret all that valuable, lost time I wasted playing the school game, for play it I did, though within certain limits: there was only so far I could push myself to do all those things I didn't want to do. I feel I would today have a better idea of what I want to do with my life had I not spent as much time as I did reading books I didn't want to read, writing papers I didn't want to write, solving problems I didn't want to solve, and taking tests I didn't want to take. I do not and cannot believe that all of that busy work was “good for me” or that it “made me what I am today.”¹ The truly valuable influences in my intellectual life did not take the form of school assignments; they took the form of *life experiences*.

For me, back in 1984, the prospect of working with Seymour Papert and the Learning and Epistemology Group was the experience of a lifetime. I did not think of it as going to school and still less as getting a degree. To Seymour's credit, working in the Learning and Epistemology Group proved to be very unschool-like. There was a minimum of courses I had to take, a minimum of hoops to jump through. What few classes there were largely took the form of seminars, the best of which were run by the students themselves. Much of my time was taken up working with children. Indeed, Seymour does not make very much of a distinction between teaching, learning, and research. They are all blended together. It was the chance to do this type of *work*, not just studies, and to do it within the context of a community of people who were thinking about related issues, that attracted me to the Learning and Epistemology Group.

Soon after arriving in Boston I had the very good fortune of meeting the author, lecturer, and critic John Holt. In his books I found many of the same ideas that attracted me to Seymour Papert in the first place. Our common concern for children, ideas about the nature of learning, and, especially, love for music, ensured that we would become fast friends, as indeed we did. *Friskolen 70* was often the topic of our earliest conversations. Even though, by that time,

¹Though in other respects, I am still recovering from the damage school has done. There are various intellectual areas that school very nearly ruined for me. Literature, for instance, or history. I am only beginning to enjoy such intellectual pursuits again, but I still have a long way to go.

John was firmly convinced that home schooling was where he wanted to devote his energies (after spending many frustrating years working within the school reform movement), he still spoke with great admiration about *Friskolen 70*. I hope that I have captured in these pages something of what John thought was so special about that place.

There is no question that John has been a huge inspiration to me, as Jean Piaget was to Seymour Papert. In the truest sense of the word, he was—and still is—my teacher. It was I who made him so. What impressed me the most about John was that he was the most self-consistent person I had ever met. *He really practiced what he preached*. And it vexed him greatly when he discovered any inconsistencies, however small, between his philosophies and his own lifestyle. In this respect, John was no romantic; he was no idle dreamer. He was a realist and a pragmatist. In addition, John's writings introduced me to a family of thinkers with whom I align myself in this work: Ivan Illich, George Dennison, Jean Liedloff, Erich Fromm, A. S. Neill, Homer Lane, Paul Goodman, James Herndon, Innes Pearce and Lucy Crocker, Jules Henry, and Alice Miller (among others). This

group of thinkers and writers doesn't have a name, though at one point Erich Fromm tried to coin the phrase "humanist radicalism" to describe the sort of approach taken by Illich, himself, and others. But to my knowledge, this name has not stuck. According to Fromm, "Humanistic radicalism is radical questioning guided by insight into the dynamics of man's nature, and by concern for growth and full unfolding."

... [Humanist radicalism questions every idea and every institution from the standpoint of whether it helps or hinders man's capacity for greater aliveness and joy. ... [Among] the kind of common-sensical premises that are questioned by humanist radicalism [are] the modern concept of "progress," which means the principle of ever-increasing production, consumption, timesaving, maximal efficiency and profit, and calculability of all economic activities without regard to their effect on the quality of living or the unfolding of man; or the dogma that increasing consumption makes men happy, that the management of large-scale enterprises must be bureaucratic and alienated; that the aim of life is having (and using), not being; that reason resides in the intellect and is split from the affective life; that the newer is always better than the older; that radicalism is the negation of tradition; that the opposite of "law and order" is lack of structure. In short, that the ideas and categories that have arisen during the development of modern science and industrialism are superior to those of all former cultures and indispensable for the progress of the human race.²

The thinkers who comprise this "intellectual tradition" were never assembled as a group, nor did they really think of themselves as such. It is only through chains of "family resemblances" (in the Wittgensteinian sense) or mutual influences that I can refer to them as an intellectual tradition at all: Lane influenced Neill; Neill influenced Dennison; Dennison and Liedloff influenced Holt; Holt, Illich, and Goodman all influenced each other; Goodman influenced Dennison; Pearse and Crocker influenced Goodman and Holt; Reich influenced Goodman and Neill; Neill influenced Fromm; Fromm influenced Illich ... and so on, in a crisscrossing network of shared ideas. Several of these authors, at one time or another, passed through CIDOC—Ivan Illich's Center for Intercultural Documentation in Cuernavaca, Mexico, where a series of seminars on the topic of "deschooling" were held in the early seventies. These writers invariably appear in the acknowledgments of each other's books (or if not, they usually write the glowing blurbs that appear on the back covers). I have derived much insight from their wisdom; they have helped me make sense of much of my experience reported here. To use a turn of phrase I shall introduce shortly, they have helped make my description "thick."

²Erich Fromm's introduction to Ivan Illich, *Celebration, of Awareness* (New York: Anchor Books, 1971), p. ix. I wish to apologize to readers who are offended by the use of the words "man," "men," and "he" to mean people in general (i.e., men and women). Several of the citations in this thesis, unfortunately, use this sexist language, even though many of them were written at a time when their authors should have known better.

Acknowledgments

Now comes the hard part. There have been so many people who have played a role in this work, from its conception right to the very end that it will be hard even to categorize the various ways people have contributed to the development and refinement of "my" ideas. I put the word "my" in quotes because, in an important sense, the ideas are not

mine. I see my contribution in terms of the particular *synthesis* I have created, i.e., the way I have applied these ideas to interpret and analyze the particular situation at hand. And in so doing, in bringing these ideas to bear upon an “ethnographically informed inquiry,” I feel I have added something to our understanding of the ideas themselves. They take on a new vitality, a new degree of depth and richness, a three-dimensional, true-to-life form.

The writing has been hard—no doubt about it. After returning from Denmark, I had somehow to confront my own morass of experiences (“data” never felt like the right word), to swim or, more accurately, to wallow through it and attempt to construe it in some sort of an intelligible form. Easier said than done! It wasn’t that I didn’t know what to say. On the contrary, I had, if anything, far too much to say and what I had to say seemed to go off in all directions at once. I found some degree of consolation in the writings of Clifford Geertz, reflecting in his melancholy yet strikingly honest way on his own brand of ethnography:

To turn from trying to explain social phenomena by weaving them into grand textures of cause and effect to trying to explain them by placing them in local frames of awareness is to exchange a set of well-charted difficulties for a set of largely uncharted ones. ... The stuttering quality of not only my own efforts along these lines but of interpretive social science in general is a result not ... of a desire to disguise evasion as some new form of depth or to turn one’s back on the claims of reason. It is a result of not knowing, in so uncertain an undertaking, quite where to begin, or, having anyhow begun, which way to move.³

Oh yes, I knew what he meant all right. The painful part was knowing about all the good stuff that I had to *leave out* of the thesis, because it just didn’t fit into the framework I eventually adopted. Believe me, there are huge chunks missing. But, after all, one simply can’t say everything. In the end, what I have produced cannot be described as a piece of ethnography. The work is, as the title states somewhat ponderously, “ethnographically informed,” but it is as much a piece of philosophy as it is ethnography, and in other ways as much social criticism as it is philosophy.

I must begin my thank-you’s by acknowledging the contribution of my thesis committee: Seymour Papert, William Higginson, and Howard Bernstein. The extent of their support has been enormous: intellectual, financial, as well as personal.

It is hard to know what to say about Seymour. The storm that his book created in my mind has been brewing for about seven years now. It has been a thrill to work alongside him—and I do mean alongside and not under, for Seymour does not erect the usual barriers between professor and student. I have been as open and, at times, as critical with him as he has been with me. It is a sign of the respect we have for each other, which, in my case, has been most flattering. He is a man truly devoted to learning, and it is a sign of his humility that he has been as willing and eager to learn from me as I have been to learn from him. The fact that he has let me do this sort of study at M.I.T., at the Media Lab, is testimony that he is really a humanist at heart. He has always maintained that his research is about children and learning, not about computers, and the support he has given me in my work bears this out. Throughout the writing process, I have continually been impressed by Seymour’s uncanny ability to find the few jewels amidst the vast rock quarry, so to speak, to zero in on the few key ideas that form the crux of an entire

argument. At times, it has taken me months to figure out and work through ideas that he located after spending a few minutes pondering a piece of my text. His mind acts like a surgical knife, paring away the extraneous material to reveal the inner core, the heart of the matter—a sort of living Ockham’s Razor. Clearly he is a man of great brilliance, and I feel lucky to have had a chance to be a member of his team, and hopefully also, to have contributed in some way to his life’s work.

³Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1983), pp. 5-6.

Throughout this entire process, Bill Higginson has been much more than an adviser; he has been a close friend as well. I continue to be amazed by the breadth of his knowledge. He has read practically everything! (What else could one expect of a self-confessed bibliomaniac?) I appreciate his challenging me to define more accurately the position taken by the teachers at *Friskolen 70* vis-à-vis mathematics, which is his own pride and joy. Like Seymour, he has shown me through his example what it means to live mathematics, to have an affinity for toying and playing with pattern, to have a mathematical world view. One side effect of this, though, is that I still have a whole stack of cryptic, pun-laden computer mail to decipher! I have come to the conclusion that one cannot write a doctoral thesis without a sense of humor, and Bill, in his lighthearted way, always pointed out the funny side of everything and reminded me to laugh.

My relationship with Howard Bernstein goes back (can it be?) nine years. I am so pleased that we have been able to keep in touch all this time, and thrilled that he could have a part in the present work. Howard has been one of my mainstays throughout this whole process: always sympathetic when the goings got tough (as they frequently did), and always able to understand immediately and to provide truly helpful suggestions as to what to do. Howard is a generalist par *excellence*. There seems to be very little that he has not thought about at one time or another. His comments on my drafts demonstrated for me the true meaning of the word *scholar*: his sharp, critical mind questioned just those things that needed to be questioned. As has been true throughout all the years I have known him, Howard provokes me to think, to reconsider, to deepen my understanding, and to elevate my work to a higher plateau. If this work does in fact contain a degree of richness, I feel that it comes from Howard’s influence and the style of scholarship he exemplifies.

Conversations! This thesis is the result of hundreds of them. I must thank all those people who took enough interest in my work to discuss, or sometimes to argue, the issues I was grappling with. Many of them provided insightful commentary on portions of the text as well. Special thanks goes to Edith Ackermann, Howard Austin, Frances Batuyios, Denise Bisailon, Sandie Bellone Bleecker, Tim Bleecker, Mario Bourgoïn, Jim Davis, Mabel Dennison, Andy diSessa, Bill Egnatoff, Mike Eisenberg, Nira Farber, Pat Farenga, Greg Gargarian, Tamar Globerson, Ricki Goldman Segall, Idit Harel, Brian Harvey, Paula Hooper, Peggy Hughes, Susan Imholz, Isaac Jackson, Jacqueline Karaaslanian, Marlene Kliman, Bob Lawler, Fred Martin, Kevin McGee, Lise Motherwell, Stephen Ocko, Mark Palmgren, Damal Ray, Mitchel Resnick, Judy Sachter, Marilyn Schaffer, Alan Shaw (long conversations!), Susannah Sheffer, Carol Sperry, Carol Strohecker, Allan Toft, Sherry Turkle, Rena Upitis, Hillel Weintraub, Sylvia Weir, Joseph Weizenbaum, and Uri Wilensky.

Of these people, I feel I must single out the names of a few special friends who have helped me in special ways. Carol Strohecker read and provided enlightened commentary on all of my drafts. She seemed always to be around when I needed quick feedback or advice on something, and she was always willing to lend it. A true and generous friend! Edith Ackermann, Jacqueline Karaaslanian, and especially Greg Gargarian have been members of my fan club/cheering section all the way through. Their faith in me, and even their sometimes inflated praise, helped give me strength and confidence during those moments (and there were many) when I thought I could not possibly live up to Seymour's expectations. I cannot thank them enough. Tim Bleecker provided that all-important, last-minute help with typo-hunting and with fixing my grammatical and syntactical lapses. Lastly, in Susannah Sheffer I was lucky to find a talented and extremely knowledgeable editor. Like Carol, she read and commented on all my drafts and helped me think through the rough spots. It was clear to me from the beginning that she understood this intellectual terrain as well as (and frequently much better than) I did. I would gladly give her an honorary doctorate (which, I'm sure, she would totally and defiantly refuse!).

I must also thank all the teachers and children with whom I have worked at the Josiah Quincy and James W. Hennigan schools. Though I remain critical of compulsory schooling, I must acknowledge the many good things that go on in those places. I do respect the sincere, dedicated people in those schools with whom I have had the pleasure of working, even if I find myself at odds with the purposes of the institution they work for.

Now is about the time (in the acknowledgments genre) when one starts thanking family and other loved ones. I thank my family for their love, support, trust, faith, and especially for their patience. I thank the Razdows for giving me a place to stay during the final months of editing, and for providing me with a miniature laboratory in the form of Max, Oliver, and Thaddeus. I will miss them. I thank my aunt Rita for "being on my side" in all the family debates. I thank my mom for putting up with my being so far away for so long a time, which I know she didn't like. I thank my dad for (eventually) learning to stop asking the question, "When are you going to be finished?" I thank my older sister Tanya for her periodic E-mail messages toward the end—it was nice to know people out there were thinking about me—and my brother Stephen for his periodic phone calls and meetings in the subterranean depths of the Harvard Square T station. Lastly, I must thank my younger sister Susan who was and is another of my true teachers. Through growing up together, through just being herself, and through her love, she taught me more about children than all the books I have read.

Aaron Falbel Cambridge, Mass. March 1989

Preface

Through Thick and Through Thin

IN 1980, A BOOK APPEARED that sent shock waves through the education world. The book was *Mindstorms* by Seymour Papert, Professor of Mathematics and Education at M.I.T., and it contained a radical message concerning the use of computers as tools for learning. The foreword of his book is titled "The Gears of My Childhood," and in it

Papert relates a moving story about his own childhood love affair with mechanical gears. This oft-quoted passage—a mere three pages in length—is fast becoming a classic in educational literature. It also serves to introduce one of the key ideas in the book; the notion of an “object-to-think-with.”

Before I was two years old I had developed an intense involvement with automobiles. The names of car parts made up a substantial part of my vocabulary: I was particularly proud of knowing about the parts of the transmission system, the gearbox, and most especially the differential. It was, of course, many years later before I understood how gears work; but once I did, playing with gears became a favorite pastime. I loved rotating circular objects against one another in gear like motions and, naturally, my first “erector set” project was a crude gear system.

I became adept at turning wheels in my head and at making chains of cause and effect: “This one turns this way so that must turn that way so...,” I found particular pleasure in such systems as the differential gear, which does not follow a simple linear chain of causality since the motion of the transmission shaft can be distributed in many different ways to the two wheels depending on what resistance they encounter. I remember quite vividly my excitement at discovering that a system can be lawful and completely comprehensible without being rigidly deterministic.

I believe that working with differentials did more for my mathematical development than anything I was taught in elementary school. Gears, serving as models, carried many otherwise abstract ideas into my head. I clearly remember two examples from school math. I saw multiplication tables as gears, and my first brush with equations in two variables (e.g., $3x+4y=10$) immediately invoked the differential. By the time I had made a mental gear model of the relation between x and y , figuring how many teeth each gear needed, the equation had become a comfortable friend.

... A modern-day Montessori might propose, if convinced by my story, to create a gear set for children. Thus every child might have the experience I had. But to hope for this would be to miss the essence of the story. **I fell in love with the gears.** This is something that cannot be reduced to purely “cognitive” terms. Something very personal happened, and one cannot assume that it would be repeated for other children in exactly the same form.¹

Papert realizes that his own attraction to the differential gear was idiosyncratic and personal. One cannot expect, after all, that everyone will fall in love with car parts. But, he reasons, if gears are too particular, computers might be more generic and thus provide a source of more readily appropriable objects-to-think-with.

My thesis could be summarized as: What the gears cannot do the computer might. The computer is the Proteus of machines. Its essence is its universality, its power to simulate. Because it can take on a thousand forms and serve a thousand functions, it can appeal to a thousand tastes. This book is the result of my own attempts over the past decade to turn computers into instruments flexible enough so that many children can create for themselves something like what the gears were for me.²

Seymour Papert, Mindstorms: Children, Computers and Powerful Ideas (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1980)

³Gilbert Ryle, *Collected Papers, Vol. 2*, see especially “Thinking and Reflecting” and “The Thinking of Thoughts,” (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1971), pp. 465-496; and Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973)

These are indeed stirring words, and it is not hard to see how they could have pricked the imaginations of thousands of educators struggling with recalcitrant mathematics students.

I have a particular reason for starting with this gear story. I wish to use it to introduce aspects of both style and content that will play a central role in this thesis. From the point of view of style, I wish to engage in a particular brand of hermeneutics—of analysis and interpretation—that will serve as a model for the type of enterprise that comprises this thesis as a whole; for lack of a better term, one might call it “cultural hermeneutics.” But in addition, from the point of view of content, I wish to dig deeper into this gear anecdote to highlight what I see as being the central focus of this thesis: the social context of learning. There is much here in this discussion of objects-to-think-with that needs to be unpacked, to be fleshed out, or to be “thickened.”

The philosopher Gilbert Ryle and the anthropologist Clifford Geertz have used the phrase “thick description”³ to refer to a style of explication that takes into account the *context* of an activity or piece of behavior, as opposed to a “thin description,” which mentions only its immediate, surface-level characteristics. A description becomes “thickened” as its elements are placed within an informed context or some sort of intelligible frame. In trying to illustrate the difference between thick and thin description, Ryle and Geertz ask us to consider how we distinguish a wink from a twitch. Given that the outward behavior is the same—the rapid contracting of eyelids—what is it that lets us sort out one from the other?

The two movements are, as movements, identical; from an I-am-the-camera, “phenomenalistic” observation of them alone, one could not tell which was twitch and which was wink, or indeed whether both or either was twitch or wink. Yet the difference, however unphotograph-able, between a twitch and a wink is vast; as anyone unfortunate enough to have had the first taken for the second knows. The winker is communicating, and indeed communicating in a quite precise way: (1) deliberately, (2) to someone in particular, (3) to impart a particular message, (4) according to a socially established code, and (5) without cognizance of the rest of the company.⁴

A thick description, then, makes reference to a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures in terms of which behavior or activity (e.g. winks and twitches) is produced, perceived, and interpreted. Without such structures of signification, we are left with only thin description (the contraction of eyelids), and the price we pay is that we miss the significance of what is going on.

Similarly, I want to say that there is a lot else going on behind the scenes in Seymour Papert’s gear story. Taken by itself, Papert’s statement, that gears “carried many otherwise abstract ideas into my head,” can lead to a thin description of learning, where it is reduced strictly to an interaction between a person and an object. I want to highlight and bring to the fore the *context* of this anecdote, to thicken the description, and to show that the human situation, the social context, or the surrounding culture⁵ plays a vital role in the human enterprise we call learning. Indeed, to speak of learning outside of such a

context would be like identifying winks with twitches, as we today identify learning with education or schooling,

Let us now return to the gear story and see if we can thicken the description. In an interview published in *Technology Review*, Papert reveals a little bit more of the context surrounding his early fascination with gears.

⁴Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, p. 6.

⁵I will use the terms “social context,” “human situation,” and “culture” more or less interchangeably even though there are probably subtle differences between them.

Papert first experienced the power of appropriating knowledge at the age of two or three while playing with an old truck near his home in Swaziland. His father, an entomologist studying the migration patterns of the tsetse fly, had brought his wife and young son with him into the jungle. The family lived in a succession of base camps on the east coast of Africa, following the lethal fly’s trail.

“There was a lot of machinery in those camps, trucks being repaired,” Papert recalls. “They used to let me drive this one truck— they put it in low gear so it could only go three miles an hour. If I ran into anything, it wouldn’t do any harm. And when the truck was stopped, I would climb underneath and watch the gears. I became fascinated by gears.”⁶

Because their camp was in the middle of the jungle, maintenance of the vehicles and other machinery had to be performed on site. There were no garages or mechanics for miles around. For this reason, taking apart a truck was a normal, everyday activity of the adults around young Seymour. It was no surprise, then, that the parts of transmission systems and the like should become familiar objects and form a part of his early vocabulary. With this as a backdrop, we can better understand Papert’s reflections about his experience with gears in *Mindstorms*.

First, gears were a part of my natural “landscape,” embedded in the culture around me. This made it possible for me to find them myself and relate to them in my own fashion. Second, gears were a part of the world of adults around me and through them I could relate to these people.⁷

A thicker description of the gear story would point out that during the early part of his childhood Papert lived in the context of what might be called (among other things) a *gear culture*. He fell in love with gears as he might have fallen in love with the trees and animals around him. His attraction to gears and mechanical objects, though far from inevitable, was consistent with the particular form of life he experienced in (of all places) the African bush. The point about using gears to relate to the adults around him underscores just this social aspect of learning. Papert’s love for gears cannot be separated from his love for the people around him—a love that manifests itself as an intense desire to play an active part in the world, in the life of the surrounding culture. For young Seymour, gears and other mechanical objects were perhaps the most visible, tangible, and accessible parts of that adult culture.

⁶Alison B. Bass, “Computers in the Classroom,” in *Technology Review*, 90(3), April 1987.

⁷Papert, *Mindstorms*, p. 11.

What has all this to do with learning mathematics, which, after all, was Papert's reason for relating his childhood story in the first place? My point is precisely that it has everything to do with learning mathematics (or anything else). *Learning has more to do with falling in love than with systems of pedagogy and methods of instruction.* Or said another way, getting to know something (an idea, a skill) has more in common with getting to know a person⁸ and forming a relationship than with eating or ingesting something (the usual metaphor). Viewed in this way, learning becomes primarily a social act, not a technical one, and to understand it we must look at its social context. And when we do this with the gear story, we see how a little boy's falling in love with gears, forming a special relationship with them and with the people around him, enabled the gears to take root "in the subsoil of the mind"—to recall Dewey's phrase. One could even say that gears became a part of his world view: round objects became fantasy-gears, as did his own body.⁹ This act of *seeing things as gears* through play and fantasy (two themes we shall return to later) was a key ingredient that enabled Papert to make the connections with school mathematics that he later made. What might have been an alienating piece of knowledge became "a comfortable friend."

Stepping back a bit and looking at the style of this analysis, it is important to note that we did not attempt to set up a causal model, as if through some sort of micro-analysis we could figure out *exactly* how, say, tinkering with gears led to an understanding of certain mathematical ideas. No, the aim of thick description is not to establish cause and effect but to explain an event by placing it in an informed context. Again, the goal is to gain a better understanding of *what's going on* beneath the surface of an activity or piece of behavior without reducing it (and, in my opinion, denaturing it) to some sort of mechanism. Readers who are looking for a water-tight, mechanistic, causal theory of "exactly how learning happens" will be disappointed. They will not find one here.

In point of fact—to continue with the discussion of content—Papert explicitly raises the issue of the social context of learning toward the end of *Mindstorms* when he considers the context of the sort of culture that might grow around computers when they are used in ways he has articulated throughout his book.

I have shown how this culture can humanize learning by permitting more personal, less alienating relationships with knowledge and have given some examples of how it can improve relationships with other people encountered in the learning process: fellow students and teachers. But I have made only passing remarks about the social context in which this learning might take place. ... Will this context be school?

I take this query to be the challenge of the present work. I shall show that the assumptions that go along with the view of learning that Papert espouses are in many ways antithetical to the assumptions about children and learning that underlie the institution of school as we know it. Fitting Papert's "Logo philosophy"¹¹ into school is like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. The task can be accomplished only if either the peg or the hole becomes deformed—and there are many reasons why schools will resist the type of changes that Papert's ideas would demand.¹² This raises the question: If the context is not school, then what is it?

⁸For a fuller discussion of this idea, see Chapter 6 in *Mindstorms*, "Powerful Ideas in Mind-Size Bites."

⁹ “You can be the gear; you can understand how it turns by projecting yourself into its place and turning with it.” — *Mtndstorms*

The main part of the thesis contains a description of just such an anti-school: *Friskolen 70* in Copenhagen, Denmark. I spent eight months at this extraordinary place, from November 1986 through June 1987, and much of what follows is my attempt to make sense of my experience there, to understand what type of a place it is. My reason for looking at such a place is to make the discussion of social context concrete by referring to a real community made up of real people. I do not propose *Friskolen 70* as a model for schools or even as something to replace schools. I do not regard it as a blueprint for anything, but rather, I see it as my own sort of “object-to-think-with.” I shall use it to generate issues concerning the social context of learning, and hopefully also to convey something of the sense of why these issues matter.

¹²Most of these reasons are political and economic in nature. For a fuller discussion, see Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1976); and Joel Spring, *Education and the Rise of the Corporate State* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972).

Introduction

Technocentrism

One could even argue that the principal contribution to education made thus far by the computer presence has been to force us to think through issues that themselves have nothing to do with computers.

— Seymour Papert

FOR ALL THE EMOTION AND PASSION GENERATED in discussions about computers in education, a characteristic feature of the debate seems to be a general lack of depth. Some expect the computer to save the schools. Others assail the computer as a technological fix that diverts our attention from the real issues at hand. But both of these extreme viewpoints make the same mistake of referring to *the computer* as the agent that produces some desirable (or undesirable) effect. Does *the computer* promote or enhance cognitive growth? Does *the computer* promote mechanical, heartless, instrumental reason or mechanical thinking? These questions—heard time and time again in the debate—exhibit a certain attitude or level of understanding that Seymour Papert of M.I.T. has come to call “technocentrism.”¹

Papert invented the term by analogy to the way Jean Piaget used the word “egocentrism” to refer to the thought and reasoning of very young children.

¹ Seymour Papert, “Computer Criticism vs. Technocentric Thinking,” *Educational Researcher*, 16(1) pp. 22-30.

Whereas egocentrism refers to the tendency of small children to make sense of the world through the self (e.g. “The moon follows me wherever I walk”), technocentrism places a similar sort of centrality in a technical object. Influences properly belonging to people and cultures are instead attributed to technical objects; that is, centrality and agency are given to the technical objects themselves. Tools are said to have “an effect.”

Papert illustrates how ridiculous technocentric questions can sound: “Does wood produce good houses? If I built a house out of wood and it fell down, would this show that wood does not produce good houses? Do hammers and saws produce good furniture?” It is not hard to fabricate further, silly-sounding examples: “Do brushes produce beautiful paintings? Do violins produce beautiful music? If I played something on the violin and it sounded horrible, would this show that violins do not produce beautiful music?” The point I wish to explore is why all these questions about wood, saws, hammers, brushes, and violins sound so absurd, whereas questions along the lines of “Is the computer good for children? Does computer programming promote better thinking skills?” seem to many like reasonable things to ask.

Technocentric statements involving computers typically refer to *the computer in general* stripped of the particularities of context. Papert suggests that such technocentrism might stem from the novelty and technical mystique that surround the computer, making it “loom too large” in the eyes of many, thus producing certain erroneous beliefs or stereotypes analogous to racial or sexual stereotypes. However, a thicker description would add another layer to this interpretation: it’s not only assumptions about the computer that account for such stereotypes but also, and in particular, the context of the discussion in which the computer is situated.

Indeed, it is just as easy to construct absurd technocentric queries involving the computer: “Do spreadsheet programs balance books properly? Do word processors write good books and articles? If I used a word processor to write a book and everyone hated it, would this show that word processors are not good for writing books?” Even the “computer naive” can appreciate the absurdity of such questions. After all, everyone knows that people write books, not word processors, just as everyone knows that the true agents are people and not the hammers, saws, brushes, violins, etc. in the other examples. However, when it comes to discussions about education, things become less clear; the question of agency becomes somehow blurred. Why? I want to argue that it is certain root assumptions about what education is that make questions like “What is the effect of Logo on planning skills?” sound reasonable, and not anything to do with computers per se. Technocentrism, then, is not an ailment but a symptom. Prevalent beliefs or stereotypes about education set the stage for it to enter the scene and find a comfortable niche in our thinking.

Education—a designed process, a technical act

ed-u-ca tion, n. [L. *educatio*, from *educare*, to educate]

1. The process of training and developing the knowledge, skill, mind, character, etc., especially by formal schooling; teaching; training.²

² Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary, 2nd Edition, p. 576.

Not everyone uses the word “education” in the same way, and therefore it is hard to pin down a definition with which everyone agrees. But it is perhaps safe to say, as the above definition indicates, that most people mean by education a process that some people carry out on other people for the purpose of developing, molding, and shaping them in some way, an enterprise in trying to make people learn what some group of people somewhere thinks they ought to know.

The above definition addresses the question of agency up front. From the perspective of the student, education is a passive process; it typically means going to a special place and getting something done to you, rather like some sort of treatment. Indeed, in our everyday language, we speak of “getting” an education. Our commonsense notions of teaching also portray education as an external event: the teacher “does something” so as to “produce learning” in the learner. Now, this does not mean that the learner has to sit there motionless. The teacher can in turn have the learner “do something” to bring about some desired effect. Yet, it is the teacher who designs the process and is thus the active agent. The learner remains passive despite his or her “activity.”

Erich Fromm writes of the importance of distinguishing between activity meaning merely “doing something” and activity in the deeper sense, taking into account the underlying psychic conditions.

By “activity,” in the modern usage of the word, is usually meant an action which brings about a change in an existing situation by means of expenditure of energy. What is *not* taken into account is the *motivation* of the activity. ... A man sitting quietly and contemplating, with no purpose or aim except that of experiencing himself and his oneness with the world, is considered to be “passive,” because he is not “doing” anything. In reality, this attitude of concentrated meditation is the highest activity there is ... which is possible only under the condition of inner freedom and independence.³

³Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York: Bantam Books/Harper & Row, 1956)

The person in a deep hypnotic trance may have his eyes open, may walk, talk, and do things; he “acts.” The general definition of activity would apply to him, since energy is spent and some change is brought about. But if we consider the particular character and quality of this activity, we find that it is not really the hypnotized person who is the actor, but the hypnotist who, by means of his suggestions, acts through him. While the hypnotic trance is an artificial state, it is an extreme example of a situation in which a person can be active and yet not be the true actor, his activity resulting from compelling forces over which he has no control.⁴

⁴Erich Fromm, *Man For Himself* (New York: Ballantine Publishing Co., 1947)

In these passages, Fromm makes an elegant distinction between activity in the thin sense (expenditure of energy, movement) and the thick sense (purposeful, willful, autonomous behavior). It is a distinction that is important to bear in mind when the words “active” or “activity” are encountered in an educational context.

There has been much discussion in recent decades about trying to make education more “active” by having students “do something” instead of just sitting and listening. Doubtless this was an improvement—but not a very big one. Most of the efforts hovered near the thin sense of activity, emphasizing the mere expenditure of energy often at the expense of the volitional. John Dewey’s phrase “learning by doing” could be (and often was) interpreted in the thin sense to mean *doing assignments*; say, building a diorama instead of just hearing or reading about something, or filling out worksheets. Even when “open education” was the catchphrase of educational reform, the game was the same: teachers would try to get their students to learn whatever it was that they (or others) decided that children ought to know by creating activity units, projects, discovery paths, learning modules, etc.⁵ The teacher’s role in the open classroom may have changed

somewhat: from that of the overt taskmaster to the covert seducer, from saying “You must do this!” to saying “You’ll really like doing this.” But in a very real sense, *the seducer is only a step away from the hypnotist*. Both deal with directing someone else’s “activity.” And in the case of the classroom teacher, it makes little difference (at least, for the present discussion) whether this control of people’s actions is gained through the use of force or through the use of seduction. But just as contracting one’s eyelids is not the same thing as winking, doing what the teacher demands (or suggests or would like) does not necessarily mean one is active. Being an active learner in the thick sense implies that certain conditions hold with regard to issues of *autonomy, volition, choice, and intentionality*.

⁵See Herbert Kohl, *The Open Classroom* (New York: Random House, 1969); Ewald B. Nyquist and Gene R. Hawes, ed., *Open Education* (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1972); Charles H. Rathbone, ed., *Open Education: the informal classroom* (New York: Citation Press, 1971); and Charles E. Silberman, ed. *The Open Classroom Reader* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973).

Let us take an example from the computers-in-education debate in order to show how the difference between thin and thick descriptions of activity can lead to radically different interpretations, understandings, and points of view. Early on in his book *Mindstorms*, Seymour Papert states in quite plain terms where he stands in the computers-in-the-schools debate. He makes his case for how computers might profitably be used by children (and not *on* children) as tools for learning.

It is not true to say that the image of a child’s relationship with a computer I shall develop here goes far beyond what is common in today’s schools. My image does not go beyond: It goes in the opposite direction.

In many schools today, the phrase “computer-aided instruction” means making the computer teach the child. One might say the *computer is being used to program* the child. In my vision, *the child programs the computer* and, in doing so, both acquires a sense of mastery over a piece of the most modern and powerful technology and establishes an intimate contact with some of the deepest ideas from science, mathematics, and from the art of intellectual model building.⁶

⁶Papert, *Mindstormz*, p. 5.

Now, one could interpret the phrase “the child programs the computer” to mean any *programming whatsoever*, regardless of context. Thus, a teacher might think, “If I have my students program the computer, then they will ‘establish an intimate contact with some of the deepest ideas...’” But a thicker description of programming, like our thicker description of activity, would reveal more about the context of any piece of programming. Was it an assignment? With what sort of motivation did the learner approach the act of programming? What connection did it have with activity going on around the learner? In particular, what was the learner’s *relationship* to the task? If we are to understand what Papert is really driving at, the phrase “the child programs the computer” needs to be unpacked, fleshed out, thickened.

Moreover, there are hermeneutical problems associated with the three little words in Papert’s text: “in doing so.” Again, one interpretation would imbue the phrase with aspects of causality, regarding the “sense of mastery” and the “intimate contact” of which

Papert speaks as automatic consequences of the act of programming. However, a more textured interpretation would avoid terms of such action-at-a-distance causality and would instead regard programming as a culturally embedded activity. A thick description of a person's "relationship with technology" and "contact with powerful ideas" must be framed in terms of a particular culture, a particular social context, as we saw in our discussion of Papert's relationship with gears (see Preface). We would have to know more about just what *sort* of programming a child is doing and how he or she *feels* about it.

Because education is viewed as a designed process or as some sort of technical act performed on people, interpretations tend to gravitate toward the thin end of the spectrum. Descriptions of programming in educational settings are stripped of details of context. Programming itself is expected to have an "effect" and to possess causal powers that can be measured. These assumptions are reflected most powerfully in educational research: the last few years have witnessed a deluge of studies with such titles as "On the Cognitive Effects of Learning Computer Programming," "Cognitive Consequences of Programming," "The Cognitive Effects of Computer Learning Environments," "Effects of a Logo Microworld on Student Ability to Transfer a Concept," "Effects of Computer Programming on Young Children's Cognition," "The Effect of Learning to Program in Logo on Reasoning Skills of Junior High School Students," etc., etc.⁷ Indeed, the whole paradigm of educational research that administers pre- and post-tests (used by these studies) reinforces the notion of education as a technical act: you give a pretest, you do something to the children (or have them do something), and you give a post-test.⁸ But in pointing to these sorts of studies I am not so much casting doubt on their methods or results but on *the questions they are asking*. They are technocentric questions because education itself is viewed as a technocratic, industrial process—a technical act. For example, Jan Hawkins, a researcher at Bank Street College of Education, is quoted in *Psychology Today* as saying: "Important learning discoveries do not necessarily result just from working with LOGO."⁹ Yes, this is a true statement—but why would one have thought otherwise? The comment points to the fact that the investigation itself was based on thin, technocentric premises. These researchers are supplying right answers to wrong questions.

To summarize the point, a central feature of education, given the way it is practiced and researched, is its location of the -causes of learning in someone or something external to the learner. This idea of education as a designed process or technical act not only leaves us with a thin description of the way learning happens, but when we act in accordance with this view, we tend to do great damage to learning in the thick sense. Our actions end up attacking the true sources of learning: *the curiosity, interest, resourcefulness, ingenuity, creativity, confidence, concentration, attentiveness, thoughtfulness, and reflection of the learner*.

⁷The point here is not to condemn technocentrism as some sort of "sin" but to recognize it and grow beyond it. For this reason, I have not identified the authors of these studies or provided precise bibliographic references. Browsing through the pages of, say, the *Journal of Educational Computing Research* will yield many such examples, if the reader is curious.

⁸It is interesting to note that the pre- and post-test paradigm originated not with educational research but with agriculture. (I am indebted to Brian Harvey for first bringing this to my attention.) But children are not plants that can only respond to environmental conditions, nor can they be thought of as being all of the same crop; they are individuals with minds of their own. To the extent that we treat them like crops, we dehumanize them.

⁹ James Hassett, "Computers in the Classroom," *Psychology Today*, September 1984, p. 26.

To say that the sources of learning are within the learner is not to dismiss the importance of the surrounding community or social context. Yet it would be wrong to say that such background conditions *cause* learning to occur. Their influence is great: the social environment can be supportive or unsupportive, help or hinder, nurture or impede engagement with the world. But even the best environments don't cause or in any sense guarantee learning. The social psychologist Abraham Maslow makes this point well:

A society or a culture can be either growth-fostering or growth inhibiting. The sources of growth and humanness are essentially within the human person and are not created or invented by society, which can only help or hinder the development of humanness ... This is true even though we know that a culture is a *sine qua non* for the actualization of humanness itself, e.g., language, abstract thought, ability to love; but these exist as potentialities in human germ plasm prior to culture.¹⁰

I mention this issue only to point out how easy it is, in discussions of education, to fall into the trap of thinking in terms of cause and effect. It is important to understand how closely wedded such talk of causality is to the notion of education as a technical act. Education, insofar as it is equated with teaching and schooling (recall Webster's definition), is a process aimed at causing or producing learning. A similar trap exists here, as it is possible to read this discussion of social context and culture and see it as a more effective way of *teaching*, as if to say: "If only I could arrange the environment in the right way, then I could get the kids to learn anything I want."¹¹ I urge the reader to resist the temptation to bring the technical act of education to bear on the social dimension discussed here. It would be incorrect to view the present work as a "scientific" study of the social context of learning for the purpose of "improving education," meaning suggesting better *methods* of teaching and schooling. As Clifford Geertz has written, "... culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly—that is thickly—described."¹² Likewise, this study is not about methods of education but about its culture, its context. And although the style of analysis I shall use here is informed by techniques from the field of ethnography, this study differs in important ways from those that are usually called scientific; in much of Western science, we frequently not only want to understand nature but also to *control* it, or even to understand it in *order to* control it.¹³ Even leaving aside the important moral questions that lie behind this sort of social control, such an interpretation—reminiscent of Skinnerian behaviorism—does not do justice to the thickness and the embeddedness of learning in culture. The very act of trying to control culture becomes a part of the culture itself. And in the case of learning, the more we try to control and manipulate someone's learning, the more we steal it from him or her, and the more energy the learner puts into

protecting him- or herself from this manipulative culture instead of using that energy for real learning, for engagement with the world.

¹⁰Abraham Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being* (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand Co., Inc.,

¹¹This is not the way I understand Papert's metaphor of the "educator as anthropologist," though I could easily imagine someone adopting such an interpretation. See Papert, *Mindstorms*, pp. 32 A: 181.

¹²Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, p. 14.

¹³For example, the famed Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, who contributed much toward our understanding of the social dimension of learning with such concepts as the "zone of proximal development" and "scaffolding," criticized Leo Tolstoy for "overemphasizing the role of spontaneity, of chance, and of obscure feelings" in learning. Unlike Tolstoy, he was after control. He saw the zone of proximal development as a theoretical construct that could aid instruction, as something that could be "utilized" to "lead the child to what he could not yet do." See Lev Vygotsky, *Thought and Language* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), p. 151, p. 189. Another example can be found in Ann Swidler's case study of two free schools, *Organization Without Authority: Dilemmas of Social Control in Free Schools* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1979). In her analysis, she takes precisely the step I am urging readers of this study *not* to take.

Teaching and Learning

The Helping hand strikes again!

— John Holt

Let us now examine more closely the relationship between teaching and learning, as this distinction lies at the heart of much of our discussion. Again, I shall make use of the hermeneutical categories of thin or surface-bound levels of understanding and thick or context-bound ones.

What is the relationship between teaching and learning? Looking at common educational practice, it would seem that learning is the result of teaching—the better the teaching, the better the learning. Indeed, the task of the teacher in most schools can be stated as follows. On the one hand, there is the material (i.e. the stuff-to-be-learned) and on the other hand, there are the students. The teacher's job is somehow to get the former into the heads of the latter. Practically all debates on education concern themselves with endless variations on this basic theme. Sometimes the argument is about what the subject matter or curriculum ought to be—what is to be taught.¹⁴ Other times it is about how the material is to be taught: how fast, in what order, at what age, in what manner (rote learning, discovery learning, Socratic method, etc.).¹⁵ Still other times the debate centers around issues of testing and evaluation of both teaching and learning, and it is asked why the material seems to stay in the heads of some but not of others and what is to be done about this (e.g. the debate surrounding "learning disabilities"¹⁶). But the underlying scenario is the same: material; heads; get material into heads.

¹⁴See E. D. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988} for the most recent contribution to this aspect of the debate.

It must be said, of course, that most people in the teaching profession would disavow such a crude formulation of their work. They prefer to think of themselves as members of the “helping profession,” as nurturers, and as bearers of culture. Yet, if one looks at what teachers actually do, as opposed to what they say they do, behind all the noble intentions lies the educative mission essentially as I have described it. It is as if the teacher were holding up a hoop and coaxing (or perhaps demanding or threatening) the students to jump through it.¹⁷

There is a certain conflict of interest built into the very notion of the helping professions (psychiatrists, doctors, social workers, teachers, etc.): the livelihood of these practitioners depends on a steady stream of clients in search of their help. The temptation is all too great, and often unconscious, for them to “help” people in such a way as to make themselves indispensable, to convince their clients that they cannot get along without their help and that they need to return frequently for more.¹⁸ And of course, elements of ego enter into the picture—the helper frequently wants not just to help, but to help dramatically, to be the “savior” and take credit for anything good that might transpire. This is the very opposite of empowerment.

¹⁵See Joseph Featherstone, *Schools Where Children Learn* (New York: Liveright, 1971); Ernest Boyer, *High School* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983); Diane Ravitch, *Schools We Deserve* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1985); TheodoreSizer, *Horace’s Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984, 1985); Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (New York: Delacorte, 1969).

¹⁶For a recent and interesting expose of the field of learning disabilities, see Gerald Coles, *The Learning Mystique: A Critical Look At Learning Disabilities* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987).

¹⁷Of course, teachers have their own sets of hoops through which *they* must jump. So do principals, etc., all the way up the line. In the end, no one claims responsibility for the hoops: the blame is placed on “society.” Everyone is so busy jumping through hoops that they don’t have time to stop and ask why the hoops are there, or whether they really need to be there in the first place.

However, a thicker description of the relationship between teaching and learning would first acknowledge that very much learning happens without explicit teaching. This is what Seymour Papert has termed “Piagetian learning” or “learning without being taught.”¹⁹ But this is not to say that there is no relationship whatsoever between teaching and learning. In thickening our understanding of the relationship, it will be important to examine the *context* of any instance of teaching: specifically, to distinguish between *asked-for teaching*, that is, a form of help or assistance that is invited by the learner, and *unasked-for teaching*, actions performed without the learner’s consent, performed because the teacher (or someone whom the teacher represents) feels they are for the good of the learner.

We are all familiar with asked-for teaching. Nearly everyone at one point or another has been in the position of both asking for and providing some sort of help or assistance.

A good example of asked-for teaching is giving directions to a lost motorist. When the motorist explicitly asks for directions, his or her mind is *open to the experience*. The motorist is expecting help and is thus both attentive and receptive to the help when it is offered. The state of mind of the motorist sets up the possibility for learning to occur.

Of course, the directions supplied to the motorist (even if accurate) do not *guarantee* that she or he will arrive at the proper destination. It is up to the motorist to understand, remember, and carry out the advice offered by the helper. This is just another way of saying that teaching does not necessarily produce learning, even when asked for. The helper, when asked to help, may make the task much, much easier (or sometimes harder!) but never automatic. A teacher can provide support or assistance to *help* someone learn, but not to *make* someone learn.

¹⁸See Ivan Illich, *Medical Nemesis: The Expropriation of Health*. (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1976); Ivan Illich, Irving K. Zola, John McKnight, Jonathan Caplan, and Harley Shaiken, *Disabling Professions* (London: Marion Boyars Publishers, 1977); and also Thomas Maeder, "Wounded Healers," *The Atlantic Monthly*, January 1989, pp. 37-47.

¹⁹Papert, *Windstorms*, p. 7

The major problem with seeing the sort of teaching that goes on in compulsory schools as help is that the help is largely unasked-for. It is *compulsory help*²⁰ But unasked-for help is often no help at all. In fact, unasked-for help generally impedes learning—a message John Holt repeated many times in his writings and lectures.

Very young children, who display their feelings openly and directly, react quite strongly against unasked-for help. Two- or three-year-olds scream with rage at the parent or relative who, with only the best intentions in mind, provides help without being invited or asked. "Nooooo! Lemmee do it!" they scream. Such help carries with it the silent message or subtext of "You are incompetent and cannot do this thing, learn about this thing, or even know it was important without my help." Small children hear these sorts of messages loud and clear, and, if they hear them often enough, they begin to believe them. In this way, unasked-for help breeds incompetence, unasked-for teaching impedes learning.²¹

²⁰Ivan Illich would often shock his audiences by speaking of schools in the same breath as prisons and insane asylums. His point is this: what these institutions have in common is that they provide a sort of compulsory treatment, compulsory help.

²¹ John Holt, *How Children Learn*, revised edition (New York: Delta/Seymour Lawrence, 1967, 1983}, p. 68

But there are deeper reasons why unasked-for help is unlikely to be helpful. When a person does ask for help, that person is *expecting* some sort of assistance, and that means that the person's mind is receptive and attentive to what transpires. The person is open to the experience. Unasked-for help, on the other hand, is, more often than not, seen as an *intrusion* and takes the person by surprise. The person's mind is directed away from the task at hand and *toward the intruder*. Moreover, the resentment, anxiety, or sheer surprise engendered by the intrusion often interferes with the very *perception* of the help being offered. It is often not even seen or heard. What occupies the mind of the learner instead is, "Hey! What's going on here? Who invited you?"

The notion of just what is “asked for” is not as clear cut as it sounds. There are in fact many ways of asking for help; it is not always the case that the requests are verbal. But for the present discussion, let it suffice to say that just because one sees someone struggling with something, it doesn’t mean the person wants to be helped. One has to make a judgment call, and it is frequently a difficult one to make. Even a well-meant *offer* of assistance can convey the message that one has little faith in the learner’s ability to solve his or her own difficulties. The psychotherapist and pioneer juvenile penologist Homer Lane asserted that even newborn infants are sensitive to unasked-for help—help that robs them of the joy of discovery, even if the path to such joy involves much frustration.

Mind from its earliest development has two different needs, to possess and to create, to have and to experiment, to repeat former pleasure and to do new things for the sake of doing them. The first dawn of consciousness is when the child does something with a definite purpose and recognizes his power over his own hand. First he discovers ownership of his hand, then that he can move it. He now has his first misunderstanding with his mother. He is screaming and stiffening his body in rage. ... What has happened? He had almost met with success in the first serious task of his life, and had been interrupted at the critical moment by his mother. He had been trying to get control of his hand. He had found, after having watched its spasmodic movements, that he could make it move, and could to some extent direct its movements. He was concentrating all his effort on putting the fist in his mouth. He wanted to put it in his mouth, rather than in his ear or his eye, because so far in his life his only source of satisfaction had been through the mouth. Having had only one pleasure, he wanted to experience it often; so when he had made the astounding discovery that he could at will move his hand, he wanted to use this new-found power for his own happiness. His motive was purely selfish and primitive, but the moment he began to exercise this power of deliberate action he jumped into difficulties, and began to learn by doing. With effort power increased and this produced intense interest. This interest is a spiritual activity. He now wanted to *put* his hand in his mouth, not merely to *have* it there. But his mother had observed his efforts, and seeing that the difficulties of control made him fretful, she had put the fist in for him, and when she did this he cried. Originally all he had wanted was the pleasure of having the fist in his mouth. But he had found the unexpected source of a still greater interest in the task of getting it there. His cry was from divine discontent with the difficulty of his job. By assisting him his mother had deprived him of success and his creative energy had been balked. The child dislikes assistance which defeats his purposes, for doing, rather than having, is to be the ruling principle of his life. In adults the creative or spiritual impulse has been weakened, and we ourselves emphasize possession rather than creation, but the child emphasizes the spiritual. The mother argues that when she puts his hand in his mouth, he cries because he is hungry, and is therefore disappointed when he gets not food but a hand. But the mother here sees the material before the spiritual, and this is how we begin the process of creating in children “original sin”—a conflict in them, that is, between what they rightly want and what other people, whose attitudes of mind they will soon adopt and make their own, think that they ought to want.²²

In later chapters, we shall investigate the origin of needs in relation to freedom and learning, and we shall see how the forces that demand repression of a child’s wants and needs can wreak havoc on his or her learning and sense of self.

The situation in schools, however, goes even further than this. It is not just that students receive unasked-for help with a self-chosen task: in most cases, students have very little choice at all as to what they may do at any given time. The subject matter, the lesson plan, the curriculum has been decided *for* them. Curriculum planners have already decided what sort of “help” children need: math, spelling, history, literature, science... all in prescribed amounts at prescribed levels of difficulty at prescribed times.²³ School curriculum is compulsory curriculum, compulsory treatment, compulsory help. Thus, not only is the teaching of this curriculum unasked-for, but also the very content of the activities entailed by the curriculum: reading this particular book, computing this particular problem, doing this particular assignment. Indeed, according to Fromm, “activities” would be the wrong word to use here. This sort of teaching—unasked-for help with an *unwanted* task—goes beyond our earlier description of unasked-for help, which was viewed as an intrusion interrupting some activity in progress. Its relationship to learning is antagonistic: it is much more likely to hinder learning than to help it.

²²Homer Lane, *Talks to Parents and Teachers* (New York: Schocken Books, 1928, 1969)

Moreover, unasked-for, unwanted teaching slowly but surely convinces people that they are incapable of learning without teaching. People *learn* to associate and identify learning itself with schools and schooling, just as “medical treatment is mistaken for health care, social work for the improvement of community life, police protection for safety, military poise for national security, and the rat race for productive work.”²⁴ People are unable to “recall” what learning felt like in their early childhood; they “forget” that they entered the world as gifted and competent learners, curious about the world and enormously resourceful and talented at finding out about it. Of course, as small children, they were never really *aware* that they were “learning.” They were not in a position where they could take note as to whether they were good or bad at it. If, as adults, they appreciate the power and wholeness of small children’s learning, they tend to associate it with some biological stratum that they themselves shall never experience again. Their own stance towards learning has been transformed from viewing it as a natural process, like breathing, to an artificial one, like factory assembly. The end result is that people come to believe that they will not learn unless they are taught, unless they are made to learn.

²³In the extreme case, education ministers of certain countries that have adopted national curricula boast that they can look at their wristwatches and tell which page of which textbook is being studied at the current moment by all the children of a given age in their country.

²⁴Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970, 1971).

The Theft of Learning—Alienation

I have stated that adopting a “technical” view of education (namely, that good teaching will cause learning) is not without its consequences. It is not just that we miss the fuller, more textured picture: when we act as if we really could control someone else’s learning, we in a sense steal learning from the learner. To say that a person’s learning is controlled by someone else—as in Fromm’s example of a person under

hypnosis—is to say that such a person is *alienated* from his or her own experience. Many critics of schooling underline the fact that schools alienate their students through what has been termed the “hidden curriculum.” Ivan Illich writes, “Schools make alienation preparatory to life... by teaching the need to be taught.”²⁵ But just what does alienation mean in this context? This, too, is a concept that needs to be thickened. I turn to Joel Spring for a fuller discussion:

One of Ivan Illich’s arguments regarding the necessity of deschooling society focuses on [the] concept of alienation. What the school accomplishes is the alienation of man’s ability to act or to create his own social being. In the nineteenth century Karl Marx argued that the product of man’s activity represented an objectification of self. What men produced through their activity was a reflection and objectification which gave men an awareness of self and related them to society. Alienation in this context meant that the product of labor became foreign or alien to the individual. This condition resulted from a combination of new industrial organizations and capitalism. Marx defined alienation as, “First that work is external to the worker, that it is not part of his nature; and that, consequently, he does not fulfill himself in his work but denies himself, has a feeling of misery rather than well being. ... It is not the satisfaction of a need, but only a means for satisfying other needs.”

The triumph of school in the twentieth century has resulted in the expansion of this concept of alienation. Technology and state capitalism still make work meaningless to the individual and create a condition of alienation from the product of labor. The school increases this alienation by making alien the very ability of the individual to act or create. In school the ability to act is no longer an individual matter but is turned over to the experts who grade, rank, and prescribe. Activity, itself, no longer belongs to the individual but to the institution and its experts. In the nineteenth century man lost the product of his labor; in the twentieth century man lost his will.²⁶

In this passage, Spring is essentially talking about a process of dehumanization. Alienated persons are treated as things. They lose the power to create and to act, or rather; these powers are stolen from them by the institutions and the people who run them (who are often themselves just as alienated).

Erich Fromm provides his own definition of alienation in his book on social psychology, *The Sane Society*:

By alienation is meant a mode of experience in which the person experiences himself as an alien. He has become, one might say, estranged from himself. He does not experience himself as the center of his world, as the creator of his acts—but his acts and their consequences have become his masters, whom he obeys, or whom he may even worship. The alienated person is out of touch with himself as he is out of touch with any other person. He, like the others, is experienced as things are experienced; with the senses and with common sense, but at the same time without being related to oneself and to the world outside productively.²⁷

²⁶ Joel Spring, *Education and the Rise of the Corporate State*

²⁷ Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society* (New York: Ballantine Books, Inc., 1955).

Although Fromm is not specifically talking about schools here, it is astonishing how well the description fits. Schools cannot help but alienate their students from the world as

long as they treat learning as an activity separate from the rest of life. The school's subject matter or curriculum has been decontextualized—or to use Papert's phrase, "dissociated*—from the stream of life, where, as Wittgenstein has noted, words derive their meaning.²⁸ The student becomes out of touch with the world, because the world is delivered to him or her a little piece at a time, in predigested form. The teacher invariably finds her- or himself acting not in response to the student's wishes or requests for help but according to the lesson plan, teacher's manual, or curriculum guidebook, which is to say, according to the goals of some anonymous authority. Not only are students alienated from their own interests, but also, they are frequently not even allowed control over their bodies: "Sit straight!" "Face forward!" "Lineup!" "Pay attention!" "Eyes on your own paper!" "No Talking!" "No, you should have gone to the bathroom earlier...."

It must be pointed out, however, that schools have no monopoly on the alienation business. Many of the same techniques are embedded in our child-rearing practices, as we will see in chapter 2. But schools waste no time in pressing onwards with the colonization of the child's experience. As the anthropologist and sociologist Jules Henry has observed, "The early schooling process is not successful unless it has accomplished in the child an acquiescence in its criteria, unless the child *wants* to think the way the school has taught him to think. He must have accepted alienation as a rule of life."²⁹

The extent to which our methods of education alienate students from the world is seen in the following passage from George Dennison's book. *The Lives of Children*. He describes a twelve-year-old boy named Jose who had experienced years of failure, resentment, and shame in the public schools of New York City.

²⁸"Only in the stream of thought and life do words have meaning." Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, ed. G. Anscombe and G. von Wright (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), note 173. ²⁹Jules Henry, *Culture Against Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963, 1965), p. 291.

He could not believe, for instance, that anything contained in books, or mentioned in classrooms, belonged by rights to himself, or even belonged to the world at large, as trees and lampposts belong quite simply to the world we all live in. He believed, on the contrary, that things dealt with in school belonged somehow to school, or were administered by some far-reaching bureaucratic arm. There were no indications that he could share in them, but rather that he would be measured against them and be found wanting.³⁰

One day we were looking at a picture book of the Pilgrims. Jose understood that they had crossed the Atlantic, but something in the way he said it made me doubt his understanding. I asked him where the Atlantic was. I thought he might point out the window, since it lay not very far away. But his face took on an abject look, and he asked me weakly, "Where?" I asked him if he had ever gone swimming at Coney Island. He said, "Sure, man!" I told him that he had been swimming in the Atlantic, the same ocean the Pilgrims had crossed. His face lit up with pleasure and he threw back his head and laughed. There was a note of release in his laughter. It was clear that he had gained something more than information. He had discovered something. He and the Pilgrims belonged to the same world! The Pilgrims were a fact of life.³¹

Jose's laughter—it has a haunting effect and brings about a feeling of uneasiness. It is hard to decide whether we should laugh along with him in release, or cry in shame. How

many Joses are out there right now? How many more are we creating, alienated from the world, degraded, made to feel out of touch, less alive?

However, it is not only the “losers” and dropouts who are affected by this type of alienation. It is also the case for the so-called good students—the Grand Masters of the school game. They are as alienated from the outside world—from their culture—as the losers are. The winner students are enclosed in what John Holt called “spaceship school,”³² a confined environment filled with children of about the same age, plus one adult. The spaceship piloted by the adult, travels through the vast expanse of subject matter, disciplines, curricula—navigating all the obstacles, tests, exams, homework, grades along the way. But one day the spaceship must land on the planet Earth, and its passengers emerge to find out that they know very little about that place. Just listen to students talk in worried tones among themselves about what they will do when they “get out into the real world.”

³⁰George Dennison, *The Lives of Children* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969)

Instead of Education—Living

Our thicker, context-oriented description of learning stands in stark contrast to the notion of education as doing something to people, shaping and processing them. Instead, learning is viewed as living, as a process not separate from the rest of life, as a natural consequence of being fully alive and in touch with the world. Living, here, means something more than merely existing, for there are various extents of being alive. And to the extent that one is alive, meeting life with energy and enthusiasm, to that same extent, one is learning. Conversely, to the extent that one is alienated from life, is fearful of any real engagement, avoids genuine contact, views the world as a place of danger, to that same extent, one is less alive and thus closed off to learning.

Our thicker description also has a richer view of culture. Culture is not regarded to be a thing, a commodity that needs to be *transmitted* to the child, as if it could be “passed on” like a baton in a relay race. It is viewed more like a medium that surrounds, as water is to fish. It surrounds us in the form of books, people, places, tools, objects, work, play, ritual, ceremony... and countless other things and activities. A person learns to the extent that he or she shares in and partakes of the life offered by the surrounding culture. And conversely, the enemy of learning is alienation from culture. The small child is not even aware that he or she is engaged in the “process of learning.” The child simply lives, is open to experience, is engaged with the world, is curious about it, and wants to get out into it. What the child needs, then, is not instruction but *access* to the world and a chance to play a meaningful part in it.

³²John Holt, “Spaceship School,” in *Growing Without Schooling*, issue no. 34

Seymour Papert provides an image of what the social context of learning/living can look like through his description of the Brazilian “samba school.” I shall quote him at length, for he raises certain themes that will play a vital role throughout this thesis.

At the core of the famous carnival in Rio de Janeiro is a twelve-hour-long procession of song, dance, and street theater. One troop of players after another presents its piece. Usually the piece is a dramatization through music and dance of a historical event or folk tale. The lyrics, the choreography, the costumes are new and original. The level of

technical achievement is professional, the effect breathtaking. Although the reference may be mythological, the processions are charged with contemporary political meaning.

The processions are not spontaneous. Preparing them as well as performing them are important parts of Brazilian life. Each group prepares separately—and competitively—in its own learning environment, which is called a samba school. These are not schools as we know them; they are social clubs with memberships that may range from a few hundred to many thousands. Each club owns a building, a place for dancing and getting together. Members of a samba school go there most weekend evenings to dance, to drink, and to meet their friends.

During the year each samba school chooses its theme for the next carnival, the stars are selected, the lyrics are written and rewritten, the dance is choreographed and practiced. Members of the school range in age from children to grandparents and in ability from novice to professional. But they dance together and as they dance everyone is learning and teaching as well as dancing. Even the stars are there to learn their difficult parts.

Every American disco is a place for learning as well as dancing. But the samba schools are very different. There is greater social cohesion, a sense of belonging to a group, and a sense of common purpose. Much of the teaching, although it takes place in a natural environment, is deliberate. For example, an expert dancer gathers a group of children around. For five or for twenty minutes a specific learning group comes into existence. Its learning is deliberate and focused. Then it dissolves into the crowd.

... The samba school, although not “exportable” to an alien culture, represents a set of attributes a learning environment could and should have. Learning is not separate from reality. The samba school has a purpose, and learning is integrated into the school for this purpose. Novice is not separated from expert, and the experts are also learning.³³

What Papert is describing here is not so much a school, but *a meeting and doing place*, and the doing here is, for the most part, dancing, music, and theater. Though toward the end of the passage Papert states that the “learning is deliberate and focused,” I think it would be more accurate to say that the *activity*—the doing—is deliberate and focused. The people at the samba school are not just engaged in learning, but in the important business of putting together the procession for the carnival. They are engaged in rehearsing, auditioning, composing, trying out new choreographies, and, of course, enjoying themselves and each other’s company as they do these things. Their doing *is* their learning, not a means *for* learning.

Papert’s observation that “learning is not separate from reality” is just another way of saying that *learning is living*; it is not separate from the mainstream of life. It was noted that the preparation and presentation of the carnival procession is an important part of Brazilian life and that the performances are charged with contemporary political meaning. This is by no means a frivolous undertaking where “anything goes.” On the contrary, the preparing for the procession is a very serious affair—something very important is being expressed. A salient feature of all this activity is the level of *integration*^ the people at these samba schools are doing, working, playing, engaging in a sort of social criticism—all of a piece.

Most important is the *social cohesion* and *sense of belonging* that is part of the fabric of the samba school. Here we have a *human community* in the truest sense. There is a *continuum of expertise* ranging from novice to expert, from child to adult. Their *shared culture* is manifest in their very actions. Their work, their *common purpose*, is at once entertaining, lively, strenuous, and very serious.

The image of the samba school suggests a model for a human community where learning is fully integrated into daily life. Excited by this image, I became interested in searching for other models of this sort—other types of meeting and doing places—where the range of activities was broader than that of the samba school.

I became aware of such a place through reading a chapter in a book by John Holt, appropriately titled *Instead of Education*, which described a “school” in Denmark, just outside of Copenhagen. This was the *Bagsvaerd Ny Lilleskole*,³⁴ and from the description, it seemed that it had many of the same outstanding hallmarks of the samba school.

³⁴Literally, “Bagsvaerd New Little School.” Bagsvaerd is a suburb of Copenhagen.

The *Ny Lilleskole* in Denmark [is a place] where true teaching can be done because the children there relate to the adults freely, and therefore fearlessly and honestly. A friend of mine, Peggy Hughes, who worked at the school for two years, made a film about it called *We Have to Call It School*. Early in the film, one of the teachers says, “We have to call it school. Children have to go to school, and if we didn’t call this a school they couldn’t come here.” But, except that it is a place where children go during school hours, it is in no way like a school. No “education” takes place there. It is in fact a doing place. In it about eighty-five children, age six or seven to about fourteen, come together with a group of six adults, who work with the children to make a community which is lively, interesting, pleasant, secure, trusting, cooperative, and humane. In this community the children live their lives as they see fit.

As they see fit. These words mean just what they say. Subject only—like all of us—to the limits that they do not hurt each other, or destroy each others’ or common property, the children in this school do what they want, with whom they want, for as long as they want, and all of the time. The teachers, in turn, provide and oversee a place where the children can do this; think up at least some interesting things to do. and provide the means—materials, tools, etc.—to do them; make use of and share their own many skills and talents; if asked, help the children do things they want to do; and in general, are on hand for the children to show things to, or ask questions of, or just to talk to and be with. But they are not there to “exercise their adult responsibility,” i.e., to try to hint, or nudge, or bribe, or threaten, or seduce the children into doing what they or someone else has decided would be good for them.³⁵

In an attempt to understand more about the place, I visited the school, now called *Friskolen 70* and located in Copenhagen, for a period of eight months.³⁶ Like an ethnographer, my goal was to describe, sort out, and make sense of the dynamics of the culture.

³⁵John Holt, *Instead of Education*, (New York: E. P. Dutton t Co., Inc., 1976)

³⁶The exact dates were from November 3, 1986 to June 14, 1987. I also returned for a three week visit in January 1988, mainly to conduct interviews with former teachers and graduates of the school. The school changed its name from *Bagsvtsrd Ny Lilleskole* to

Friskolen 70 in 1980, when it moved from Bagsvaerd to Copenhagen. The “70” in its present name reflects the year it first started in Bagsvaerd, namely 1970.

Ethnography—“Cultural Hermeneutics”

“Doing ethnography,” writes Clifford Geertz, “is like trying to read (in the sense of ‘construct a reading of’) a manuscript—foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior.”³⁷ Describing and making sense of this behavior is the ethnographer’s job. The phrase *making sense* should be taken in the most literal way—*creating* or *constructing* an interpretation.

The question posed by the ethnographer is not just “What’s going on?”—though it is that too—but also, “What does it mean?” (hermeneutics) and “What does it signify?” (semiotics). In other words, the ethnographer tries to get at what *lies behind* the observable activity, for the purpose of placing that activity within an intelligible frame. Thus, a thick description of say, the Brazilian samba school would attempt to weave into the story more than what people do there: it would include a discussion of the social and political context of Brazilian life as it manifests itself in the activities of the samba school. We would have to take a closer look at the “contemporary political meaning” that the carnival processions are “charged with,” as well as the significance of the samba school as one of the few channels for meeting and gathering of a politically oppressed people. As it turns out, there is a lot that goes on behind the scenes (prostitution, drug trafficking) as the description broadens and becomes thicker.

This is not the place for this particular description, as my real focus is not Brazil but Denmark. But the example can serve as an illustration of the quality of thickness that is the aim of ethnographic research.

Friskolen 70—A Thin Description

All who have attended school carry around with them certain expectations or preconceptions as to what any such place must be like. The very word triggers images and memories of our own schooling, and we cannot help but use these school memories, regardless of whether they are fond or harsh, to form an interpretation of any other place called school. That is to say, our own schooling acts as a lens through which we view other forms of school.

³⁷Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973)

When we use such a lens to look at *Friskolen 70* (meaning, literally, “The Free School [of] 1970”), nothing seems to focus. Our expectations don’t fit what we observe. We see about 65 children of ages 6 through 15, many of whom are in motion, or at any rate, not sitting down. Most of the activity takes place in a long rectangular room, formerly a stocking factory that had been renovated by the parents, teachers, and children themselves. The children are in no way divided up into grades or classes. They spend most of their time together in this large room, or in the adjacent gymnasium and music room. There is a constant hum of noise: talking, laughter, an occasional shout. One of the first things that attract our attention is the multitude of wooden beer cases that fill the place, some of them bearing the names of the famous Danish breweries, Carlsberg or

Tuborg. The school acquired them free of charge in 1970 when the breweries changed from wooden to plastic cases. In many ways, the beer cases themselves are emblematic of the style of the place. Cheap, durable, flexible, changeable— they fit right in with the school's larger cultural values, as our thicker description will show. Instead of classrooms, hundreds of these beer cases form shoulder-high partitions demarcating various areas or "nooks" (as the Danes call them). There are no desks or assigned places where the children have to be—just a few homemade tables scattered around the school, with more beer cases used as chairs and bookshelves. A token blackboard stands in one corner, used by children and adults alike.

Our expectations of school establish the role of the teacher as someone who leads, directs, or guides the activities of the children, someone who administers lessons and keeps order in the classroom. Here again, our expectations don't fit the scene. At first we find it difficult to find the teachers. There are eight of them in all, plus one support teacher, though none of them is employed full-time.³⁸ Most of them are rather young (in their twenties or thirties) and blend in so well with the children that it is hard to pick them out. A quick glance around the room indicates that, for the most part, these adults are doing the same sorts of activities as the children: Niels is puttering around the workshop with a group of boys; Estrid and Eva are making something in the sewing corner with a group of girls; Lis is playing a game in the gym with a group of younger children; Morten is playing the piano in the music room as two children accompany on some drums; Peter is strumming a guitar and singing folk songs with a few children; Hermann is talking in a loud, animated voice about a film he had seen the previous evening; Vivi is preparing short skits in English with another group; Sussie is sitting up in the reading loft talking with a few of the older girls; and Ane is recycling newspapers with some of the "middle" children. Even Leif and Dennis, who are officially the school's caretakers and maintenance workers, are often seen puttering around the workshop with a few children. And Annelise, the school's secretary, reads books together with some of the younger children up in her office. It becomes clear that the role of these adults is not principally to instruct but to *be with* these children and to *do things* together with them.

³⁸Morten spent a half year at the school as a substitute teacher while Lis was away on sabbatical. Eva is the support teacher who spends much of her time with one particular child. The teachers work a maximum of four days per week. Some work a bit less than this. They are encouraged to do other things on their day off, which not only relieves "teacher burnout," but also vastly enriches the time they do spend at the school. On any given day, there are six or seven adults at the school.

At various times during the day, groups of children gather together somewhere with one or two of the teachers. These groups (or "teams," as they are called) contain children of various age levels. Only some of them seem to be gathered to work on anything resembling school subjects (Danish, English, and Mathematics). The majority of the teams congregate around some activity, typically of a craft-like nature, or some topic of interest. Other teams are centered around such practical necessities as preparing the school's communal lunch, cleaning up, overseeing the school's finances, or dealing with guests and visitors. In the middle of the day, there is often a meeting of the entire school to discuss various matters of concern or interest.

The place seems to resemble a large clubhouse much more than a school. We wonder to ourselves, Can this be a school? Is anything actually learned amidst all this chaos? Where is the structure? Where is the curriculum? Where is the authority? Where is the discipline? Where are the academic standards? Where are all the things we have come to think of as being essential to school—all those things *we* experienced in school?

The activity we observe seems chaotic, unstructured, or just plain wild because we cannot get it to mesh with our expectations of school. The children seem to be happy and friendly, but are they learning anything? We must take a much closer look at the activities that take place at *Friskolen 70* if we are to come to grips with this question. But even more importantly, we must look at the context in which these activities take place, the type of human situation that forms a background to all this activity. As we shall see, there is very much going on beneath the surface of all these arts and crafts, lunch preparations, school meetings, and the rest of it. The reader will be struck by how *ordinary* the events that shall be described are. But that is just the point, that there is very much learning going on within the ordinary events of life. Describing these underlying levels—thickening the description of this place—will take up the bulk of the next chapter.

Our thick description will portray *Friskolen 70* not so much as a school (despite its name) but as a human community, that is, as a group of people who spend a good portion of their time together, doing things, going places, talking, working, playing ... in short, *living*. In the words of one of the teachers who founded the school,

The word “school” doesn’t really describe this place because it doesn’t say enough. The most important things we do here are not the things people think about when they think of school. What we care about most is the way a person grows as part of a community. This is the children’s own world, where they spend most of their time. We want them to experiment and learn through their own experience how a human community is made, to find out how to make one together, to find out how they can influence and change things if they want to. And we want them to bring this idea about life into their later lives.³⁹

Accordingly, my description of *Friskolen 70* will not be organized according to the school-based themes of curriculum, subject matter, teaching methods, or testing and evaluation, but will instead attempt to explore the dynamics of the culture— of the particular human situation that exists there—along three basic themes: (1) Structure, (2) Authority, and (3) Freedom. These new lenses, I believe, will bring into a much sharper focus the type of place, the type of human community, that *Friskolen 70* represents. Moreover, through using these lenses as analytic tools, we will come to a better understanding of the lenses themselves. That is to say, we shall find ourselves probing the depths of these three concepts, and in the end, we should be able to walk away with a richer, thicker, more textured idea of what structure, authority, and freedom mean in the context of living and learning.

³⁹Erik Guldback, narrating the beginning segment of Peggy Hughes’ film *We Have to Call It School*, filmed in 1972-74.

Chapter 1

Structure

Imposed Structure vs. Inherent Structure

“UNSTRUCTURED” IS THE ADJECTIVE most often applied to free schools or environments where elements of freedom and choice are involved, and visitors have often used this term to describe *Friskolen 70* as well. But what does this mean? How could meaningful activity really be without structure or form? It can’t—the very notion of “meaning” implies some sort of structure, pattern, form, or order. John Dewey notes this connection between structure and meaning in his book *Art as Experience*:

An experience has pattern and structure, because it is not just doing and undergoing in alternation, but consists of them in relationship. To put one’s hand in the fire that consumes it is not necessarily to have an experience. The action and its consequence must be joined in perception. This relationship is what gives meaning; to grasp it is the objective of all intelligence.¹

¹Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York; Perigree Books, 1934)

Meaningful activity, then, refers to structures and patterns of action and behavior. All meaningful experiences have structure—but not all structured experiences are meaningful! Indeed, in understanding the activity at *Friskolen 70*, we would be throwing out the baby with the bath water—we would be throwing out the meaning—if we were to abandon the notion of structure. The characterization “unstructured” would leave us with at best a thin description of the dynamics of this particular human community.

That people need structure in their lives to lend meaning and purpose to their experience is not being contested; the issue is not that of structure vs. no structure. What *is* under question is what *sort* of structure they need. If, as the teachers at *Friskolen 70* maintain, children do not need the sort of structure where they are at all times told what to do, how to act, what to think about, etc., then that raises the issue of what an alternative structure might be.

The structure of conventional schools has basically two qualities: it is fairly rigid, and it is externally imposed. The structure of conventional schools comes from the curriculum, the lesson plans, the assignments, the tests and grades, the codes of discipline, the personalities of the people in power (teachers, principals, etc.), and all the elements associated with what has been termed the “hidden curriculum.”² These elements of structure are, for the most part, non-negotiable. Even the classroom teacher has only a limited say as to the form these elements may take. The children, by and large, have no say at all. All that the children can decide is whether or not and to what extent they will comply with this structure, whether or not they will play the school game and jump through all the hoops, so to speak. But if they decide not to comply, then they must suffer the penalties.

²For a fuller discussion of the notion of hidden curriculum, see Ivan Illich, “In Lieu of Education,” in *Toward a History of Needs* (Berkeley, CA: Heyday Books, 1977, 1978); and Benson R. Snyder, *The Hidden Curriculum* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1970).

Most of us are so used to this school game, having been more or less successful players ourselves that it is hard to imagine a place called school where this game was not being played. *Friskolen 70* is such a place because it operates according to a different sort of structure, a structure that is fluid, flexible, negotiated, and “arrived at.” Instead of being imposed from without, this type of structure arises from the forms of community

life itself, just as the structure and meaning of the language we speak, as Wittgenstein maintained, is inherently based in “forms of life.”³ Lis Holm, a teacher at *Friskolen 70*, uses the following metaphor when referring to the structure inherent in the life of the community:

Above the school meeting corner there hangs a clock. Visitors never think it is a real clock, because the clock face itself is just a piece of plywood that was obviously painted by children. But beneath this rather unpretentious surface lies precise clockwork. This clock is nearly symbolic of the type of structure that everyone at the school knows and thrives on—a structure that one can sense well enough as a visitor but that at first glance is hard to relate to.⁴

The type of structure Lis refers to here is indeed not immediately visible, but it is there. It can be made apparent under a closer inspection, through constructing a thick description.

What are the elements of this other type of structure? How can one profitably talk about it? I have chosen four main components: (1) human relationships, (2) the school meeting, (3) play and creative activity, and (4) evolved rituals or traditions. These are among the elements that give shape, form, and meaning to the community life at *Friskolen 70*.

³"Here the term ‘language-game’ is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.” Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, third edition, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1958, 1968)

⁴Lis Holm, *Skolen—Bornen.es Samfund* (The School—The Children’s Society), unpublished manuscript

Human Relationships

We might cease to think of school as a place, and learn to believe that it is basically relationships: between children and adults, adults and adults, children and other children.

— George Dennison

The concept of structure is closely connected to that of *relationship*. The word “structure” itself refers to the arrangement or interrelation of parts to a whole. The whole we are considering here is a human community and the parts are the humans themselves. Human relationships thus form a key element of the structure of the school community at *Friskolen 70*, and they permeate all activity that takes place there. Relationships form an important layer that will account for the thickness of our description, that is to say, the layers of significance that lie beneath observable action.

The following excerpt from my field journal, and the analysis that follows it, shows how human relationships, and the feelings that accompany thought and action, are intertwined with the learning that happens as a matter of course— through living—at *Friskolen 70*.

Dec. 18, 1986

Maria (11) and Johanne (9) are using the wood-burning set in the workshop to make Christmas presents for their friends and relatives. Maria has just completed a small, wooden tic-tac-toe game for a cousin of hers in Sweden. The X's and O's are made out of wooden pieces that fit neatly into a finely crafted playing board. She is etching an inscription to the recipient of the gift on the back of the playing board when little Clara (6), who just started at the school at the beginning of the month, wanders by and is drawn in by the scene. She watches Maria etch a floral design under her inscription and is fascinated by the strangeness of this smoldering writing instrument. Maria notices the presence of Clara and displays for her the finished product; Clara turns over the board and feels the grooves of the inscription with her fingers. Maria asks her, "Can you read what it says?" Clara shyly shakes her head no. Maria smiles and says "Come," and she motions for Clara to come sit on her lap. Then, very slowly and sweetly, Maria sounds out the words as Clara guides her fingers over the dark-brown letters. Clara is totally absorbed: her face conveys an expression of rapt concentration, her mouth partly open, and her cheek leaning against Maria's arm. The entire episode lasts not much more than a minute. It is so effortless, natural, and unself-conscious that to call it "peer tutoring" would be to debase the beauty of the situation.

Maria was not so much giving a reading lesson to her young friend as sharing something she had made with a curious onlooker. The fact that she is a girl a few years older than Clara was important. Clara could identify with her. She could say to herself, "In just a few years, probably less, I could be doing the same thing—using these tools, making these things, reading, writing...." The fact that Maria has a somewhat maternal side to her character (which sometimes works against her) gave a particular feeling of security and closeness—"Come sit in my lap"—to Clara's experience. This security, so apparent on Clara's face and subtle body contact, made her totally unaware that she was engaged in "the process of learning," however brief. In a very real sense, the human relationship between these two girls in this brief encounter contributed to the structure of Clara's relationship with the printed word, with the activities and tools of the workshop, and with her acceptance into this new community of people.

We have only to compare this vignette to the common school experience of the "reading group" to see how profoundly human relationships contribute to the structure of the experience. Of course, there are human relationships in traditional reading groups as well, quite powerful ones at that. However, it is not the presence of relationships or lack thereof that is at issue but their *quality*. What follows is Jules Henry's description and analysis of the sorts of relationships involved in an ordinary fifth-grade arithmetic lesson, relationships marked by fear, one-upmanship, hatred, and contempt. Here is Boris at the blackboard:

Boris had trouble reducing "12/16" to lowest terms, and could only get as far as "6/8." The teacher asked him quietly if that was as far as he could reduce it. She suggested that he "think." Much heaving up and down and waving of hands by the other children, all frantic to correct him. Boris pretty unhappy, probably mentally paralyzed. The teacher, quiet, patient, ignores the others and concentrates with look and voice on Boris. She says, "Is there a bigger number than two you can divide into the two parts of the fraction?" After a minute or two, she becomes more urgent, but there is no response from Boris. She then turns to the class and says, "Well, who can tell Boris what the number is?" A forest

of hands appears, and the teacher calls Peggy. Peggy says that four may be divided into the numerator and the denominator.

Thus Boris' failure has made it possible for Peggy to succeed; his depression is the price of her exhilaration; his misery the occasion for her rejoicing. This is the standard condition of the American elementary school.... Yet Peggy's action seems natural to us; and so it is. How else would you run our world? And since all but the brightest children have the constant experience that others succeed at their expense they cannot but develop an inherent tendency to hate—to hate the success of others, to hate others who are successful, and to be determined to prevent it. Along with this, naturally, goes the hope that others will fail. This hatred masquerades under the euphemistic name of “envy.” ... It was not so much that Boris was learning arithmetic, but that he was learning the *essential nightmare*. *To be successful in our culture one must learn to dream of failure.*⁵

Aside from the fact that this sort of atmosphere tends to breed animosity and mean-spirited competition (which makes one wonder why so many defend school so strongly, saying that it provides some sort of needed “socialization”), it essentially cuts off the very *possibility* of the type of sharing and learning evidenced in the interaction between Maria and Clara.

Human relationships also form an important part of the structure of the community when it comes to discipline or behavior problems. Conventional school structure is particularly rigid in this regard: if you misbehave, you get in trouble and receive punishment. But at *Friskolen 70* the adults and children realize that punishment mostly breeds further resentment and only serves to compound whatever problem already exists. The community tries to *negotiate* a solution to behavior problems at their school meeting. This does not work in all cases, however, and sometimes specific action needs to be taken, as the following anecdote illustrates.

In 1975 a group of three boys proved to be quite bothersome and had to be dealt with in some way. It was clear that the boys were not merely going through a phase that would pass on by itself. These children, frequently coming from broken homes or perhaps from miserable experiences at other schools, are referred to by the children themselves as “The Terrorists.” They would exhibit such anti-social behavior as disturbing people who were trying to work or even destroying other people's projects that were underway. The community tried to deal with the problem by reasoning with the boys at a school meeting. But these boys would not or could not bear to hear about it and fooled around throughout the meeting, not hearing a word of the discussion. They finally left the meeting altogether.

Some of the older children discussed the problem among themselves and concluded that these boys were simply craving attention, but didn't know how to express their need in any other way than being destructive and causing trouble. The older children guessed that these terrorists were probably bored stiff at home, as evidenced by the fact that they often pleaded with other children to let them come home with them, and by the fact that it was hard even to get these troublemakers to go home at the end of the school day. The older children suggested that it might help these boys if they could see how others spent their time at home, and so the terrorists were invited to spend a few days home with some of the children. It worked—the positive relationships that formed as a result of these encounters eventually tamed these terrorists. The older children, some of whom had

themselves been terrorists at an earlier point, were able to see through to the heart of this particular problem. They called upon their own experience and empathy with the situation to act in just the right way. They were able to solve the problem in a way that no strict rule involving punishment could have.⁶

The manner in which children relate to each other is often positively curative, a point made repeatedly by George Dennison in his book *The Lives of Children*. Whereas many adults typically try to commandeer a child's behavior "for the good of the child," other children possess entirely different motives in their dealings with each other: they truly need each other as friends and playmates. Though children often get annoyed at their peers for all sorts of reasons, their actions and words do not possess the moral heaviness—in the sense of "I'm trying to teach you a moral lesson here"—that an adult often brings into the situation. Children's dealings with each other are straightforward and direct. Whereas children often have a way of turning themselves off to the reprimands of adults, the words and deeds of their peers somehow always seem to penetrate. I have seen older children calm down angry nine-year-old boys after the attempts of parents and teachers have had no effect.

At one point, toward the very end of my stay at *Friskolen 70*, I caught a glimpse of the depth of the relationships between the children, of how forgiving they are of each other, and the curative aspect that this carries.

May 22, 1987

Today the eight eldest children at the school along with the eight "next eldest" met in one corner of the school. The agenda was to determine the composition of the cleanup groups for next year. Two teachers, Hermann and Sussie, were present, but they were mostly there to observe. Care was taken to make sure that all the groups were balanced according to age and gender.

I had halfway expected arguments to ensue regarding which groups would take the children who had reputations of being trouble makers. I envisioned an uncomfortable debate of the sort, "No way, I'm not taking him!" or "She's impossible to get along with!" But to my great surprise the opposite happened. They said things such as "Oh, he's really not so bad. He's really sweet if you just get close to him. She just needs to be reminded about what to do. He's really a softie underneath it all." I was amazed how these children had a way of seeing past all the negative aspects of their sometimes troublesome peers. With such a positive basis to their relationships, it is no wonder the "problem" children get better. I dare say they handled the situation better than if it were left up to the adults.

This is not to suggest, however, that relationships between adults and children are in any way inferior to those the children form among themselves. The relationships are just of a different character. The children see things in each other that the adults don't see, and vice versa.

Children in conventional schools typically relate to their teacher as army privates relate to their sergeant. The teacher demands respect on account of his or her position of authority as "the adult." This effectively erects some sort of barrier between children and adults. It is just this sort of barrier that the teachers at *Friskolen 70* try their best to avoid.

They base their relationships not on rank, but on trust. But what is trust? Don't we all trust children? We might say that we do, but often our deeds belie our talk, and deeds speak louder than words. We must try to thicken our understanding of this concept.

Trusting children does not mean "leaving them all alone" as if to say, "I trust you to learn about the world now go out and LEARN!" *Trust does not mean an absence of contact.* Instead, trust is an attitude or stance one can adopt toward another human being—a stance characterized by openness, honesty, straightforwardness, and faith in the powers of the individual. Trusting children means being accessible when they ask for help, and helping them only as much as they ask for—not more. A relationship of trust between adults and children is marked by an absence of the question, "How can I get the children to do X?" for the answer to such a question almost always means scheming over their heads. Such scheming undermines trust and puts an adversarial, Us vs. Them relationship in its place.

To give an example of how this element of trust manifests itself in the dealings between adults and children at *Friskolen 70*, after the children do something or go somewhere, there is virtually no attempt made by the teachers to draw out certain intellectual content or to "make sure" that the children have gotten certain things out of their experiences. They trust the children to make sense of their experience, and to a large extent they trust the experiences themselves. They know that the children will ask for help or advice if and when they feel that they need or want it. Now, certainly the adults at *Friskolen 70* talk with the children about their experiences—talking is, indeed, one of the main activities that takes place at the school. But the crucial difference is that the adults talk to the children in the same spirit as when they talk among themselves, or when the children talk among themselves. Of course, the adults have been in the world longer and have a much broader range of experience from which to talk. Children value such talk very, very highly and are powerfully attracted to it. There are always a few children who sit together with the teachers when they gather at one of the lunch tables after their meal to have a cup of coffee or a cigarette and talk. It brings back the sort of childhood memory that nearly everyone has: sneaking out of bed when one's parents have invited guests to talk late into the evening. One gets a sense of missing out on something very important. However, this sort of magnetism gets turned off when the conversation turns pedagogical. For talk becomes phony when adults ask questions of children to which the adults already know the answers—the essence of the so-called "Socratic method." This is not a true conversation; it is a sort of a quiz, it is "education" in the original Latin sense of *educare* (drawing or leading out), it is unasked-for teaching. It is avoided at *Friskolen 70*. The teachers do not "hold discussions." They simply talk.

When adults trust children in this manner, something very important happens: the children come to trust the adults as well. This is illustrated in the way the children relate to their teacher, Niels, who offers various short math courses to the older children. The children know that when they leave *Friskolen 70* to enter into the eighth or ninth grade at another school, they will be expected to perform at a certain level of proficiency with respect to what Seymour Papert has called "school math"—a boredom-inducing set of symbol manipulation techniques and pencil-and-paper exercises of dubious utility. Papert sees school math as essentially a social construction of school that later "dug itself in," as did the QWERTY arrangement of keys on the typewriter keyboard.

In brief, I maintain that construction of school math is strongly influenced by what seemed to be teachable when math was taught as a “dead” subject, using the primitive, passive technologies of sticks and sand, chalk and blackboard, pencil and paper. The result was an intellectually incoherent set of topics that violates the most elementary mathetic principles of what makes certain material easy to learn and some almost impossible.⁷

In the main, mathematics—i.e. *real* mathematics—is learned at *Friskolen 70* in the context of everyday life: through building and measuring things, through dealing with money and accounting, through rhythm and music, through various games involving number and pattern, etc. One difference between real math and school math is that the former can be *lived*, while the latter bears the mark of its institutional origins in that it must be *taught*. School math must be taught precisely because it has become disconnected from everyday life.

⁷Papert, *Mindstorms*

Faced with the reality that the children will be “held responsible” for school math in their next school, Niels offers⁸ various short courses in school math for those children who will soon be leaving the school. The pace of these courses is incredibly fast. In one year, it is possible to encounter practically all of school math up through the seventh grade, which includes basic algebra. “Better to separate it out and do it very fast,” he told me once.⁹ The children probably learn the school math material about as well as children in other schools who spend years on the stuff—which is to say, not very well. Like most children, they think that school math is boring and many of them say that they hate it. I often wondered why the children at *Friskolen 70* put up with being bored when no one was forcing them to attend the short courses at all. Why didn’t they just leave?

The answer has to do with their relationship to Niels, which in turn colors their relationship to the school math. When the math group meets, Niels never has to run around and round people up or attempt to drag them away from their present activity. The children appear in the “subject corner” as if by magic. Why? *Because they like Niels and they trust him.* They know that he is there to help them with the dreadful school math, and they do want help. They know that his relationship is an honest one and that he will not play any psychological games or tricks to “get” them to do what he wants. Children desperately want such relationships with adults. They are hungry for it in a world where too many adults are phony, disingenuous, or too busy acting as “role models” to be of much use or to be trusted. Their relationship to Niels is marked by realism and this translates to their relationship with the school math. They know that the road to many of the things they might like to do leads through the schools and that this, unfortunately, is not going to change in the immediate future. Niels does not pretend that school math is fun or interesting or very useful. He doesn’t think so himself and the children are aware of this. Because the air is clear of manipulation and coercion, the children can direct their minds toward the school math (which isn’t all that difficult, just absurd) and thus can get through it very, very quickly.

⁸In fact, the Danish word Niels uses is *tilbud* or “offer.”

⁹Niels’s remark opens up a larger discussion about what makes school math so distasteful in the first place. Is it inherently bad, or is it bad because of the way it is taught? Could one teach it better? Could one teach an unalienated school math? This is,

in an important sense, a badly formed question. Unalienated mathematics implies a sort of mathematics that is not disconnected from meaning and purpose, and thus it does not really need to be taught. But whose purposes are we talking about, the learner's or the teacher's? If the learner's, then what teaching there is takes the form of asked-for help in addition to providing a sort of living model of mathematical practice. If the teacher's, then teaching takes the form of getting the kids to learn the curriculum, of leading them down a sort of predesigned path. Niels would be dishonest with himself—he would be unauthentic—if he tried to teach an unalienated school math in this second way. He would inevitably start to play the game of seduction and manipulation. Now, if Niels were himself a mathematician, things might be otherwise. He would not have to worry about teaching it at all—he would essentially live it. Mathematics, for mathematicians, is not just a body of knowledge but a way of seeing and wondering about the world, i.e., a type of world view. But Niels is not a mathematician and generally doesn't regard mathematics in this way. Nor do any of the other teachers. This is more a commentary on the status of mathematics in contemporary culture than a criticism of these particular adults,

In a one-room school with several adults, relationships between adults become as important as those between children and adults or among the children themselves. It is one thing to teach in a classroom with a door that can be closed, where what transpires occurs between the teacher and the class. It is quite another thing, however, to be a member of a community where one's activities are in full view of everyone else, including other adults. This puts the teacher in a *vulnerable* position, as one of the teachers insinuated in a magazine interview conducted in 1980.

One thing we also wanted to avoid was the teachers' isolation, such as we see in the traditional school. It was in many ways a difficult process for us. The mere fact that we were so close together, that we had to get used to working here, where one can see the whole time what the others are doing—that demanded a change-over from us, especially for those of us who were trained as teachers. It was simply a situation we were totally unused to.¹⁰

During the school's first year of existence (in 1970-71), the teachers asked a psychologist to attend their teachers' meetings to help them deal with these sorts of tensions. Their criticisms of each other could at times become very direct and harsh, and they had to learn not to let their strong feelings spill over into personal affronts. But it was precisely because they were in full view of each other that they could learn from their experience, that they could analyze together what went wrong, what went right, and *why*. A teacher who is sealed in a classroom is safely shielded and protected from criticism and potential embarrassment but is in many ways shielded from growth as well.

Relationships between teachers also open up new possibilities for cooperation between adults. Peter and Hermann are similar in many ways. They are the same age, have similar tastes in music, and had similar types of work experiences before coming to *Friskolen 70*. It was not surprising that they gravitated toward each other when the children wished to form a drama group to put together a play. Again, working together with another adult puts one in a somewhat exposed and vulnerable position, but their prior relationship helped to smooth over many of these difficulties. Furthermore, their cooperation enhanced their relationship. Through working closely together, they got to know each

other even better than before. This proved to be particularly important and valuable for Peter, who was a new teacher at the school the year of my visit.

¹⁰Mette Bauer, John Mortensen, and Birger Steen Nielsen, “*Skoltn i sig selv er en d0d ting*” (School in itself is a dead thing), — an interview with teachers of the Bagsvaerd Ny Lilleskole, in *Kontext 40*

The School Meeting

The school that has no self-government should not be called a progressive school. It is a compromise school. You cannot have freedom unless children feel completely free to govern their own social life.

— A. S. Neill

A very important element of structure within the community at *Friskolen 70* is the school meeting. It best exemplifies what is meant by the term “negotiable structure.” *Friskolen 70* is by no means the first free school to incorporate the idea of self-government through communal meetings. A. S. Neill, the founder of the Summerhill School in England, wrote extensively about the value of this idea in his many books.³³ Neill himself claims he borrowed the idea of self-government from Homer Lane who ran The Little Commonwealth, a home or community for convicts and delinquents.¹² The actual form of the meetings at *Friskolen 70* differs somewhat from those at Summerhill. At the latter school, meetings were a weekly affair and issues were decided by majority vote. At *Friskolen 70*, meetings are held on most days after lunch, or at any time of day if a pressing matter arises that needs to be addressed right away. The community does not decide things on the basis of votes, but by consensus. This tends to take longer, but is in the end more valuable. Issues are debated until there is agreement and cooperation, which the community values more highly than the situation where one group outvotes and thus overpowers another. If agreement cannot be reached, an issue can be postponed to a later meeting or, in some cases, be left unresolved.

¹⁰See especially, A. S. Neill, *That Dreadful School* (London: Herbert Jenkins, Ltd., 1937), and *Summerhill* (New York: Hart Publishing Co., 1960).

¹²See Homer Lane, *Talks to Parents and Teachers* (New York: Schocken Books, 1928, 1969); and E. T. Bazeley, *Homer Lane and the Little Commonwealth* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969).

The school meeting itself takes place on two-tiered, wooden benches built especially for this purpose. When filled with people, the benches become rather crowded, though in a pleasant and cozy way. It makes for a warm, comfortable, close setting with many people leaning against each other. Body contact is inevitable and some of the smallest children sit on the laps of the adults or of some of the older children. For many children, the school meeting is the high point of the day, and a number of parents have remarked that their children frequently talk about the events of the day’s school meeting when asked about their school day. This special feeling of physical closeness, no doubt, contributes to this sentiment, but in addition, the school meeting is a symbol that the school is really and truly *their place*.

The format for the meetings is as follows: One of the older children is responsible for maintaining the protocol of the meetings. This entails compiling a list of issues or “points” (as they are called) that individuals want to have addressed at the meeting. These are entered in a “protocol book,” where it is also noted how each point is resolved, especially if there are any new rules that are adopted. (I noticed that the children were not particularly conscientious about this last part, but it didn’t seem to pose a problem.) The person who raises an issue acts as the moderator for the discussion until the next issue is addressed. This moderator or *ordstyrer* (literally, “word controller”) must keep track of the order in which people raise their finger and then call upon them to speak, one by one.

I was struck by how well the children carry this out and how orderly and civilized most of the meetings are. Of course there are also times when the children get restless and things get too noisy. When this occurs, someone usually has to scream “Shut up!” to quiet things down again. Too many shut-ups is a sign that the meeting has gone on too long or perhaps that the issue being discussed only concerns a minority of the children. Another such indicator is when some of the small children sneak away from the meeting by crawling out underneath the benches. Attendance at the school meeting is not mandatory— though if one chooses not to attend; one still has to abide by whatever decisions are made. Only a small minority of children stays away from the school meetings and very few, if any, stay away regularly.

At the meetings, older children, on the whole, tend to talk more than the younger ones. And like the general dealings between children, their speech is very direct. They do not speak in abstract terms and say, for example, “Some children were playing in the cellar against the rules,” but instead confront each other directly and say, “Christian and Daniel, why were you playing in the cellar when you know it’s not allowed?” Some of the older children are quite skilled debaters, and over the years this rubs off on the younger ones. One parent, who is a ninth-grade teacher at a public school, remarked that his ten-year-old daughter exhibits a more sophisticated vocabulary and better command of language than his own students do. Indeed, the children at *Friskolen 70* spend literally thousands of hours talking with people of a variety of ages, and their talk is not empty talk. Consequently, they become very good at it. They speak up when something bothers them, whether at home or in school, and they expect to be listened to. At home, they are frequently a force to be reckoned with and cannot be passed over lightly. Once they get a taste for the flavor of collective decision-making, they tend to bring it home with them and insist that they be included in family decisions.

What sorts of issues does the school meeting address? From a strictly functional point of view, the tasks of the school meeting fall into the following categories: (1) organizational, (2) informational, (3) judicial, and (4) problem-solving. Let us look briefly at each of these.

Virtually all the group activities that take place in the school are organized at the school meeting. Often someone (child or adult) would suggest an idea for a project or activity that might interest others. Perhaps someone saw something on television that looked interesting, like the idea to make pinhole cameras. Or perhaps someone went with his or her family to some museum, film, concert, play, or art exhibit that proved to be interesting. Someone may have a particular skill or hobby that he or she would like to pursue at the school, like making puppets or animated films or tap dancing. Other times

children propose topics that they want to explore, such as racism, Denmark under the Occupation, outer space, Japanese culture, the city's water system, Morse code, fashion, solar and nuclear power, machines, etc. If other people are interested in any of these activities or topics, a time slot is found that does not conflict with other activities. Thus, activities are *scheduled*—which is rather different from saying that they *follow* a schedule. No two days are alike, and when visitors ask the teachers to describe a “typical day” at the school, the teachers respond by asking, “Which day?” Simply put, time is found, or rather, *time is made* to do the things people want to do. In most cases, a teacher will attach him- or herself to the group to help it get started, to help provide resources if necessary, or to lend some special skill or knowledge he or she might possess. This is largely what is meant by “teaching” at *Friskolen 70*—helping children to find and pursue their interests.

Another organizational task that comes up from time to time is the physical layout of the school. Since virtually all the walls are made up of beer cases, the layout of the school can be changed according to the space requirements of the various activities. *The space can be made to fit the activity, rather than the other way around.* New arrangements are suggested and debated at the school meeting, and if accepted, the beer cases are taken down and put into their new arrangement. This feature represents the fluidity of the school's structure in

a very tangible sense. During the time I was at *Friskolen 70* the arrangement of the school was altered twice (though not totally). It was an exciting time and one small child remarked to me, “I like it when the school changes.” As a further, somewhat symbolic gesture, the entire school is dismantled at the end of the school year so that everyone can take part in setting it up again when they return after the summer. In addition, all the school's rules are dissolved.¹³ It is an outward sign that the school is theirs, that it is, in the most literal sense, a place of their own making.

Yet another organizational task frequently addressed by the school meeting is how the school spends its money. It is a further indicator of how far the school goes toward treating children as full community members. There is not a lot of it to spend,¹⁴ and they must use it very sparingly. All expenditures over 100 kr (approx. \$13) must be cleared by the school meeting. Thus the community as a whole—not just the adults—determines how the school is to be outfitted. This, too, contributes to its structure, for such decisions influence very strongly what sorts of activities are possible.

The informational aspect of the school meeting takes the form of announcements, news, or other information to be delivered to the group. Aside from lunch, the school meeting is the only occasion where the entire community is assembled, and thus any piece of information or event that is to be shared with the entire community—such as news about upcoming trips, reports from various groups, songs, stunts, stories, etc.—must be brought forth at that time.

Very much time is spent at the school meetings discussing issues that are of a judicial or legislative nature. Often issues arise that call for new rules to be made, or perhaps old rules are called into question and have to be recast. Examples of some rules, or of issues raised that require legislative action, are:

¹³The School does have traditions, as we shall see shortly, but these, too, must be explicitly and actively renewed from year to year.

¹⁴Their purchasing budget for the entire year runs to about 60,000 kr, or about \$9,300. This works out to about \$140 that they can spend per year per student.

- No playing in the cellar.
- No climbing on the roof.
- No making paper airplanes.
- Is it allowed to play soccer in the gym?
- Don't take things out of the refrigerator without asking a member of the food group first.
- What should be done about a hockey game that got too violent?
- Some people are selling things to each other.
- No chewing gum or candy in school—unless you have enough for everyone.

In general, *Friskolen 70* has relatively few rules, and many of these are concerned with safety issues. Most of the rules are prescriptive, that is, they state what one may *not* do. This makes for greater freedom of choice than if the rules were prescriptive. A rule of the form “You must not do X!” leaves open a whole range of possibilities in terms of what one may in fact do, while a rule of the form “You must do X!” reduces the range of possibilities to the scope of X itself. The children at *Friskolen 70* seem to realize this instinctively. They have a sense that the rules are not meant to constrict their freedom but to protect it.

One sort of judicial issue that comes up from time to time is teasing. If someone feels that he or she is being teased and cannot handle the situation alone, the matter may be brought up at a school meeting. What seems like a practical joke to one person may not be viewed in the same light by the recipient, such as the time someone put perfume in the shoes of one of the younger girls. In most cases, the very act of bringing the issue up is enough to put a stop to the teasing—it is not worth the risk of facing the embarrassment that comes with being accused in front of the entire community. If the problem is a recurring one, however, the community collectively tries to find a workable solution, as the following journal entry reveals.

Dec. 4, 1986

A rather serious problem arose at today's school meeting. The issue was brought up that one of the older boys, Tommy, repeatedly neglected his responsibilities with regard to the food and cleanup groups. The fact that he was an older boy made the situation even worse, since he was setting a bad example for the younger members of his group. Tommy had been at several other schools before coming to *Friskolen 70* and problems ensued at each of them, which led to his departure. His counselors referred him to *Friskolen 70* more or less as a last resort. They advised the teachers upon his arrival “Don't bother trying to teach him anything. If you can just get him to calm down, it will be an achievement.” This only made the current situation all the more delicate.

The debate went on for a long time. “Shouldn't we give him another chance?” “No, we gave him enough chances already.” Tommy was sitting alone in the gym during the meeting as he could not bear to hear himself being talked about. After the meeting, a group of children went into the gym to tell Tommy of their decision that he would be

asked to leave school at 11:00 A.M. on each day of the following week and not participate in the lunch or cleanup at all. I myself had felt that the children's decision was too harsh in this particular case and ran the risk of backfiring, of making the situation worse. When Tommy heard the news, he declared that he would not come to school at all during the following week, and I feared that Tommy had been further distanced from the community.

I talked about the incident with Sussie, a teacher who knows Tommy quite well, and told her of my concern. She said to me, "Oh, I don't think he really means it. Tommy knows that the other children really like him and that they don't really mean to punish him. Some of the children who suggested this course of action had once gone through the same thing themselves. Tommy has too many friends here to stay away all day. You'll see—he'll be back here 9 A.M. on Monday morning."

He was! Moreover, Tommy was more cooperative with his cleanup responsibilities in the weeks that followed. These children were able to draw upon their collective experience to come up with the proper solution to the problem—a solution that went against my own "better" judgment and intuition in this case.

Yet another function of the meeting is to solve day-to-day problems as they arise. Sometimes too many people have neglected to pay their lunch money, and the food group does not have enough funds for lunch supplies. Other times problems occur when people are careless with common property, causing waste or breakage—like the time someone cut a section from the middle of a large piece of fabric instead of from along the edge, or the time someone broke a new screwdriver, acquired just the week before. Other problems are more mundane: "Has anyone seen little Peter's black shoes?" or "Too many people are parking their bikes in the driveway instead of the bike rack," or "Who will take responsibility for the new soccer ball we just purchased?"

In sum, what the central nervous system is to the body, the school meeting is to the community at *Friskolen 70*. All issues that touch community life at the school are discussed, debated, and agreed upon in a humane, democratic manner. But as I have tried to show, the school meeting serves more than just a utilitarian purpose. Beneath its functional surface, it is the site of much growth and development. Through participation in the school meeting, the children learn to be very skillful with language, as their debating skills and expressiveness come to have real consequences there. They also become quite talented at solving problems, resolving disputes, and standing up for their rights. They develop an acute sense of fairness from having to deal with real moral issues, and a keen understanding of what it means to work together to form a consensus. In this sense our current educational debate about how one can teach "morality" or "cooperation" or "critical thinking" in schools becomes a moot point: they are

not taught at *Friskolen 70*—*they are practiced*. Real issues are being decided and acted upon as they come up in the course of community life. Indeed, the art of collective decision-making that the children learn and exercise at the school meetings ranks among the most useful and valuable skills that they carry with them for the rest of their lives.

Play and Creative Activity

Play should be deemed the child's most serious activity.

— Michel de Montaigne

Much of the structure of community life at *Friskolen 70* is embedded in the specific activities that take place there. In other words, the activities themselves have a shape or form or a sort of coherence that distinguishes them from what might otherwise be called random behavior. Since the range of activities pursued at *Friskolen 70* is quite broad, it is not possible to cover all of them under one umbrella. But if I had to choose one word to characterize what the children do in this community, that word would be “play.”

There is, however, a problem with the word “play.” Adults and children don’t seem to use or understand the word in the same way. For an adult the term chiefly means some sort of recreational activity, e.g. playing golf, tennis, cards, chess, etc. Play is what adults do in their leisure time—when they are not at work.¹⁵ They have to “take time out” from their daily routine to play. Their attitude is revealed through such phrases as “Don’t mind them, they’re *just* (or *only*) playing.”

¹⁵Unless they are professional golfers, tennis players, etc., but then they usually don’t think of this as play.

But for children, there is nothing “just” or “only” about play, and in their own lives it does not occupy a place in opposition to work. For young children, *play is their work*—it is at once a serious, fun, important, pleasurable activity. “Can I go over Billy’s house and play?” is an oft-heard request from a seven-year-old. But if we heard this from an adult, would we not think it rather odd? “Play what?” would probably be our response. For adults the word “play” works as a transitive verb, whereas for children it is intransitive. We accept playing as more or less their existential state, their mode of being in the world.

Given these differences in attitude between adults and children, the process of growing up must entail, in some sense, weaning children from play. In school, play is thought to be all right for kindergartners and some first graders, but much after that, play is relegated to recess time or after school (“after your homework is done”). That is to say, play is cornered into being recreational—like adult play.

“Childhood,” wrote A.S. Neill, “is playhood and no child ever gets enough play.”¹⁶ But why all this emphasis on play? What is play and why is it so important? Alison Stallibrass, in her not very well known but important study of children’s play and its relation to development, writes:

So what is play or what is it that play can be? It can be the means whereby children develop their basic potentialities, including awareness of reality, and individuality and spontaneity of response, and therefore also self respect and a healthy appetite for experience, knowledge and skill.¹⁷

Play, then, is a means for growth and development in all its modalities, and to a large extent, our capacity for intelligent, adaptive action depends on our capacity for play. Likewise, the case can be made that our most creative artists, scientists, writers, etc., are people who have not forgotten how to play.¹⁸

¹⁶A. S. Neill, *Talking of Summerhill* (London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd., 1967), pp. 13-14. Actually, Neill went even further than this; “One could, with some truth, claim that the evils of civilization are due to the fact that no child has ever had enough play. To put it differently, every child has been hothoused into an adult long before he has reached adulthood.” (*Summerhill*, p. 64).

¹⁷Alison Stallibrass, *The Self-respecting Child* (London: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1974)

The sorts of play that take place at *Friskolen 70* can be roughly divided into three categories: (1) Fantasy Play—games that have a make-believe or pretend element; (2) Organized Games—games that have rules and strategies; and (3) Creative Activities—playful activity that results in some sort of artistic product or performance. Each form of play has its own type of structure and its own ways of contributing to growth and development.

Fantasy Play

Children use fantasy not to get out of, but to get into, the real world.

— John Holt

Eva is a delightful nine-year-old girl from Sweden, and while the best that many children her age can do to entertain themselves is turn on the television, Eva can invent hundreds of fantasy games. I have played numerous versions of Boutique, Bakery, Restaurant, Hospital, Circus, Troll and Princess ...all of which come out of her imagination with the plot of each unfolding as we go along.

Nov. 10, 1986

Eva is playing with some balloons in the upstairs part of the school near the office. She blows a few of them up without tying the ends and then releases them all at once. They go flying all over the place, which she finds very amusing. At one point, one of the balloons flies through the open door of a small storage room. There she finds a couple of old adding machines. She plays with them for a while, pushing various buttons and noting what effect is produced on the machine's tape. The machine makes a loud whirring noise as each entry is printed.

¹⁸See Richard Feynman's autobiographical *Surely You're Joking, Mr. Feynman!* (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1985), for one example of such a person.

This gives Eva the idea of playing store. The adding machines are too cumbersome to move, so she just gathers together a few beer cases in the area outside the storage room and builds for herself a counter and a chair where she, the storekeeper, will sit. She rounds up a few items to use as merchandise—some balloons, a book, a cup, some paper—which she stores inside the beer cases on her side of the counter.

She asks me, the customer, "What would you like?" I request a few things in my very fragmented Danish. She rings up the prices on her imaginary cash register (inspired by the adding machine just moments before) and announces the total bill. I pay her using pretend money, but Eva objects. I am unable to understand what I did wrong. After unsuccessfully trying to explain herself (Eva speaks no English) she writes on a piece of paper: RETIGE PENCE. I knew the second word meant money, but I couldn't figure out the first. I look it up in the dictionary, but it's not there. Invented spelling? Swedish? Who knows? In desperation Eva runs next door to the office to ask Annelise, the school's accountant and secretary, how to say RETIGE PENCE in English. She comes back and says, "real money."

Of course! I should have known. She wanted me to use real money (*rigtige penge*) instead of pretend money. Our game continues with me paying real money for the items.

I learn that Eva can calculate and give accurate change as fast as I can (or even faster, as she is more familiar with Danish currency than I). The prices she charges in her “store” reflect a fairly good knowledge of real prices (a loaf of bread, a liter of milk, a dozen eggs). A few of them were unreasonable so I complain, which makes the game all the more entertaining. The game lasts a long time (about a half-hour) until past 2:30. Eva returns all the articles to their proper places (including the money to me), dismantles her beer-case counter, and skips happily out the door to the main part of the school, saying “Goodbye” to me in English.

There is very much in this rich little anecdote (and I could have cited dozens like it), but I want to use it to highlight three main aspects of such fantasy play: spontaneity, fluidity, and multifacetedness. By spontaneity, I do not mean “arising out of nothing” or “acting by its own impulse.” Indeed, there was a definite continuity to the episode—what Dewey and Dennison call the “continuum of experience.” I *do* mean to say that the experience was not planned or designed in advance. One thing led to another: the balloons, the adding machine, the store idea, the communication problem, the money ... it was all a fluid, coherent stream of meaningful, playful activity. It is not hard to see (though it would be nearly impossible to measure) the many different levels and facets of learning embedded in such an episode, ranging from jet propulsion, to working a machine, to the social milieu of the boutique, to pricing, to calculation, to foreign language, and, lest I forget, to making friends with an unfamiliar adult. All these facets were bound up into one coherent whole. The point I wish to stress here is that Eva and others like her use this sort of fantasy play not to escape from reality, but to put themselves in *closer touch* with it. To play with an experience is to possess it, to appropriate it, to make it one’s own. Pretending to be a storekeeper is Eva’s way of understanding, through play-action, what it might really be like to be in such a situation—to sell things, to count change, to argue and bargain about a price, to try to communicate with a foreigner (this *was* real), etc. Perhaps most important is that, through this fantasy play, Eva is able to exercise her imagination. And because Eva is lucky enough to find herself in a place that affords her very, very much time for this sort of play—a place that does not oppose such play to “real schoolwork”—she has become very, very good at it.

While many theorists point to the value of play in children’s development, not all of them agree that this aspect of fantasy is beneficial to children. Most notable among such theorists is Maria Montessori who wrote in her book *The Absorbent Mind* that fantasy “should be discouraged as it distracts the child from attending to “real things.”

Another feature [of the lack of inner discipline] is the child’s difficulty, or inability, to concentrate his attention on real objects. His mind prefers to wander in the realm of fantasy. While playing games with stones or dried leaves, he talks as if he were preparing delicious banquets on immense tables and his imagination will probably take to most extravagant forms when he grows up. ... Unfortunately, many people think that these fanciful activities which disorganize the personality are those that develop the spiritual life. They maintain that fantasy is creative in itself; on the contrary, it is nothing by itself, or just shadows, pebbles and dried leaves. ...

In the world of fantasy ... there is no control of error, nothing to co-ordinate thought. Attention to real things, with all the future applications that derive from this, becomes

impossible. This life of the imagination—falsely so-called—is an atrophy of organs on the functioning of which the spiritual life depends.¹⁹

This attitude toward play is also evident in Montessori's stance toward the proper use of her specially constructed "didactic apparatus." Montessori maintained that children ought to be free to choose which of the designed activities they wished to work with, but once having decided, they must use these materials in the "right" way meaning, the way Montessori intended them to be used. One may not take the blocks or rods that make up the Pink Tower or Brown Stair and make them into mommies and daddies, horses, trains, cars, or whatever (at least, not according to "orthodox" Montessori Method), for this robs them of their true pedagogical import: to teach the child about relative sizes and lengths.²⁰ For Montessori there was a right way and a wrong way of playing.

In stark contrast with this view is A. S. Neill's skepticism of the learning-through-play idea, for he saw play as something valuable in and of itself. He criticized learning through play as a highly manipulative form of unasked-for teaching.

¹⁹Maria Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind* trans. Claude A. Claremont, (New York: Dell Publishing, Inc., 1967, 1969), p. 266. ²⁰Holt, *How Children Learn*

Caldwell Cook wrote a book called *The Play Way*, in which he told how he taught English by means of play. It was a fascinating book, full of good things, yet I think it was only a new way of bolstering the theory that learning is of the utmost importance. Cook held that learning was so important that the pill should be sugar coated with play. This notion that unless a child is learning something the child is wasting his time is a curse—a curse that blinds thousands of teachers and most school inspectors. Fifty years ago the watchword was "Learn through doing." Today the watchword is "Learn through playing." Play is thus used only as a means to an end, but what good end I do not really know.

If a teacher sees children playing with mud and he thereupon improves the shining moment by holding forth about river bank erosion, what end has he in view? What child cares about river erosion? Many so-called educators believe that it does not matter what a child learns as long as he is *taught* something.²¹

Neill was similarly critical of the Montessori's "didactic apparatus." and he saw her Method as an attempt to impose her own structure onto the child's play. But my earlier remarks about structure being inherent in meaningful activity suggest that we don't need to *put* structure into children's play; it's already there.

Neill, in his writings about the Summerhill School, observed that most of the younger boys would go through something he called the "gangster stage."²² They would engage in a type of free-form dramatic play, typically involving the use of imaginary, or sometimes wooden, weapons. The situation at *Friskolen 70* in this regard is much the same. Many of the younger boys spend much of the day in motion, hiding from their pursuers, chasing after enemies, defending their territory, etc. Just why this form of play seems to be so important to children is anybody's guess. The teachers at the school are in something of a quandary as to what to do about these boys, whom they call "The Runners."

²¹Neill, *Summerhill*, pp. 27-28. I should point out here that Neill uses the word "learning" to refer to school learning, i.e. the learning of school subjects. He certainly does not mean to say that a child at play is not learning anything at all!

The teachers, as well as the parents, are very much against violence and lament the fact that the violent mass media seem to have such a powerful hold on many of these boys' imaginations. (Alas. *Rambo* is known in Denmark.) Yet they also know that they cannot simply forbid such play—one cannot control another's imagination by fiat. Such action would only breed a resentment that would erect an emotional barrier between the adults and children. The general policy seems to be that the play is allowed to go on, though if it gets too noisy and disturbs others at work, the boys are told in no uncertain terms that they must quiet down or clear out.

I do not want to give the impression, however, that all of the boys' fantasy play is of a violent nature. Inspired by another game introduced by some parents that utilized play money Kim and Peter (both ten years old) decided to set up a "bank!" in the music room. They arranged a number of beer cases (a great fantasy toy) to make bank teller windows. They posted their banking hours and announced that they were open for business. I decided to play along and deposit a bunch of their photocopied dollar bills. When I went to withdraw some money later, I asked about the interest accrued. They had not heard of interest. Their own bank was not much different from a piggy bank. I asked them if they wanted to hear how a real bank would handle the situation—Kim was interested, so we entered into a discussion about interest and investment and how banks work in general. I want to make it clear, however, that my aim was not to take advantage of their game so as to "teach them something," nor was my motive to try to direct their game toward "reality." As a co-player in the game, I thought it might be interesting to add a new twist. I could have also tried holding up the bank, but I figured that the "gangsters" would do this sooner or later anyway.

²³ "They did!"

The two boys were free to reject my offer, and in fact Peter did reject it.²⁴ Kim was quite intrigued, and he appreciated the new slant on the game.

Fantasy also seems to play some sort of therapeutic role in the lives of many children. Children who have been hurt or demoralized by some experience in their lives need time to heal and recuperate. Rather than submerging or repressing painful experiences, children have a strong need to understand such experiences, to turn them over in their minds and come to grips with them. Just as children make sense of the world through fantasy, they can also use fantasy to analyze some of their more painful moments by playing with them. Moreover, since they are in control of their fantasies, they can gain control of the painful experiences in their minds and perhaps even create a happy ending. In this way they can rob the situation of its power to hurt. They are, perhaps without knowing it following Freud's injunction to "make the unconscious conscious" through their play, as the following example illustrates.

Every so often a group of children would play "school" at the school. They would set up a number of beer cases in the music room to form rows of desks and chairs. (The music room is the only room that somewhat resembles a classroom. It has four walls and a door, and it is about the right size.) At the front of the "class" they would assemble a tall lectern made up of still more beer cases. This was the "teacher's" place, and one of the children would adopt this role. This "teacher" would SCREAM at the class to sit down, pay attention, read out loud, answer questions, and would administer punishment if they

did not comply. The rest of the children, who played the part of the class, thought that this was uproariously funny.

²⁴Though the reason for this might have been that his English was not as good as Kim's. (My Danish at that point was not very fluent.) Kim did explain the interest idea to Peter afterwards, who included it in the game as well.

At first I thought the whole affair rather odd. Why should children at a free school want to play this game? But then I realized that the leaders of this game—the “teachers”—were invariably children who had themselves come to *Friskolen 70* after harsh experiences at other schools. Their fantasy dramatization of such a super-strict school was their way of coming to grips with their own experience through toying with it, playing with it, externalizing it. By adopting the role of such a ridiculous, tyrannical teacher—perhaps a parody of some teacher from their own past—they could deal with some of their own hurt and anxiety in a non-threatening way. They could take possession of the situation now, whereas before they had been the victims. True, other children who had never known any school other than *Friskolen 70* also participated in the game, though mainly, I think, for their own amusement.

Organized Games

In addition to fantasy play, many of the games that the children play are organized in one way or another. By “organized” I do not mean organized by some person but rather that the games tend to have rules and strategies that are understood by the players. Some of these games are the popular ones known by children everywhere (Tag, Hide-and-Seek, Hopscotch, Four Square, etc.) as well as more conventional sports (Soccer, Basketball, Hockey). But there are many, many other games of a more unconventional variety, some of which were invented by the children themselves, perhaps in conjunction with a teacher. Many of these games play a special role in the children's physical development, as they make demands on one's speed, flexibility, and accuracy.

Many of the games invented by the children show a good deal of creativity, ingenuity, and resourcefulness. One game they developed particularly struck me by its elegance and simplicity. The game is in some ways similar to volleyball, though it offers even more control and strategy. It consists of throwing and catching someone's rolled-up socks over a horizontal beam in the gym. *That was it!* The game could be played by two players or more. The beam was quite a bit higher than volleyball net, and it abutted against a sloped ceiling on one end. The rules were that if the ball touched the ceiling, the other person (or team) would gain a point. The same was true if the ball touched the floor or went out of bounds (same as volleyball). Unlike volleyball, the players could catch the ball and hold on to it. Further, the feature of the sloped ceiling made certain throws and catches more daring than others, which introduced some issues of strategy. One takes a risk by throwing the ball over the beam where the ceiling is only inches away, but such throws are also particularly hard for one's opponent to catch because they tended to land close to a wall. The game demands a surprising amount of accuracy in throwing and catching, and speed in running. The children love to play this particular game—or even just to watch and with great exuberance cheer their favorite players—created out of little more than a pair of socks, a sloped ceiling, and a beam.

Another game was created when Niels and a few boys were trying to invent a “Hollywood stunt” (another favorite activity) consisting of taking a running start and sliding on one’s stomach across one of the large, red eating tables. Sliding across one table was hard enough for most children, but what about two tables, or three? Only Niels could slide across more than one table. (He made it across three of them!). The boys were dumbfounded. How could he make it across three tables when most of them could barely manage one? Was it his weight? His height? Was he running faster than they? What? (This author tried the stunt as well and nearly killed himself in the process.) After many trials, someone hit upon the solution: Niels was wearing a heavy woolen sweater that was practically frictionless against the smooth, varnished table tops. The synthetic polyester fabrics the rest of us had on tended to cling to the surface.²⁵ The theory was tested and confirmed when one of the younger boys donned the magical garment and went flying head-first over all three tables. This intriguing game turned, quite by accident, into a rather neat lesson in physics and experimental science. The beauty of the scene was precisely that it was not designed to be a lesson. The physics was an outgrowth of the group’s curiosity with regard to an anomalous situation.

²⁵Despite my years of Physics courses, this answer did not occur to me immediately.

Still other games provide challenges in the perceptual domain. One popular game—called simply “Guessing Game”—involves recognizing subtle patterns of motion and behavior.²⁷ The players sit on beer cases arranged in a circle. One member of the group is sent away while a “leader” is chosen. This leader performs some repetitive action, such as clapping one’s hands or stamping one’s feet. etc. The others all imitate this action. Every so often the leader changes the gesture to be copied, and the others must all follow suit. The person who was sent away is then invited back. This person must stand in the center of the circle and try to figure out who the leader is. After three incorrect guesses the person must leave again and a new leader is secretly chosen. Otherwise, if the person guesses correctly, the old leader becomes the new guesser and a new leader is chosen. Some children are very good at noticing all sorts of clues—sideways glances, smirks and giggles, who is in back of you when the gesture changes, etc.—though others remain in the role of the guesser for a long time. A few times, a group of children spent an entire morning (several hours) playing this game.

Other games played by the children involve cognitive skills: games such as hangman, chess, checkers, tic-tac-toe, Nim, Concentration, various dice games, mazes, crossword puzzles, etc. It is probably easy to recognize the “educational content” contained in many of these games, in so far as they involve words, numbers, logic, and other items typically addressed in school. But these games are not introduced by the teachers as teaching devices. They are played simply for the fun of it. And part of what is meant by “fun” is that such games are intellectually challenging. Some of them involve competition and risk as well, though not in a mean-spirited or debilitating sense. The risk involved tends to add to the excitement of the game, as opposed to the sort of risk that accentuates a child’s fear of failure.

²⁰This is precisely how Thomas Kuhn says scientific discoveries are made. See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, second edition (University of Chicago Press, 1962, 1970), pp. 52-64,

²¹The mathematician G. H. Hardy once noted, “A mathematician, like a painter or a poet, is a master of pattern.

Rhythmics

Without question, a central focus of organized play at *Friskolen 70* is an activity known as *rytmik* or rhythmics. It is a blend of physical exercise, movement, dance, rhythm, drama, and free-form play. It takes place almost every day in the school’s gym. It is rather difficult to describe what goes on during these sessions, since they are never twice the same. The activity is coordinated by one of the teachers, Lis, who is herself a skilled musician, dancer, and gymnast. She borrows some of her theory about movement and physical development from the Swedish theorist Astrid Gossels. As the entire school community could not fit in the gym without risk of accident or collision, a scheme was developed early on in the school’s history for regulating the number of people in the gym at any one time. This meant dividing the school up into three groups of about twenty or twenty-five members each. After trying various kinds of groupings—according to personal preference, time preference, activity preference, and others—the division that seemed to work the best was one that went along the lines of physical development, which meant roughly according to age. The three groups evolved into the 6-8-year-olds, the 9-11-year-olds, and the 12-15-year-olds. In practice, though, these boundaries were not very rigid. The sessions typically last between thirty and sixty minutes.

I cannot possibly provide an entire inventory of everything I have witnessed in the gymnasium. Much credit has to be given to Lis for the creativity, artistry, and spontaneity of these sessions. I shall, however, select a few of the activities I have seen and describe them briefly.

Lis would often start out a session by suggesting some sort of exercise or movement as a challenge to the children. During one session with the middle group, the children experimented with how many different ways they could hop across the floor of the gym: on one foot, on two feet, alternating big and little hops, backwards, in pairs, etc. Lis would accompany their movements by beating various rhythms on several African drums set up along the wall. The rhythm would be matched to the tempo of the movement, lending a sense of timing, rhythm, and pace to the exercise. (Hence the name, “rhythmics.”)

Other times, children would work on various acrobatic stunts, such as flips, cartwheels, somersaults, walking on their hands, etc., or various types of twists or contortions of their bodies. I was particularly struck by the flexibility and dexterity of some of these children, especially the ones who have attended the school since they were six. One maneuver, called “walking through a broomstick” necessitates such flexibility that the children’s bodies appear as if they are made of rubber! A. S. Neill once remarked that free, self-regulated children had flexible, supple bodies, whereas children who were used to conditioning and molding were as stiff as boards. This seemed consistent with what I observed at *Friskolen 70* as well.

Through participation in the rhythmics activity, the children become very aware of their physical abilities, of what they can and can’t do, and develop their ability to control and feel at home in their bodies. But many of the activities contain a social component as

well. Again, human relationships and trust play an important role here. During one session I saw with the older children, the challenge was to see if they could run across the gym at full speed with their eyes closed and rely on two of the adults to catch them before they crashed into the wall. This proved to be very difficult at first. Nearly all of them slowed down when they “felt the wall coming” in their minds—usually, they were still quite far from the wall. A similar test of trust involved falling frontward or backwards with one’s eyes closed, again relying on others to break the fall. On another occasion, the age groups were mixed and an older child would hop or skip across the gym hand-in-hand with a younger one. The larger children had to learn to moderate their large hops so that the smaller children could keep up with them. This led to a discussion of what it is like for an adult to walk together with a small child, and the care and respect that must be shown in this case. We shall return to discuss the significance of this particular exercise in chapter 3.

²⁶A. S. Neill, *The Free Child* (London: Herbert Jenkins, Ltd., 1956)

It happened from time to time, especially with the older children, that an activity would generate a discussion on some topic, such as bodily development, the skeleton, the circulatory system, muscles, injury, gender differences, etc. Lis was wise enough to let these discussions meander a bit—or even a lot—if the group had an interest in the topic. Many discussions in the school start out this way: the children are doing something and start to talk about what they are doing. Such discussions arise out of the situation at hand, as opposed to the usual teacherish ploy of creating a situation so as to generate a discussion around pre-selected content.

Other rhythmic activities are related more to music and dance. Sometimes they would dance to samba or some other sort of rhythmic music. On one occasion, they decorated the entire gymnasium with different colors of yarn, forming a large “spider web” under (or in) which they then danced. With respect to rhythm, Lis suggested a game where the challenge was to keep a steady rhythm going by banging with a wooden dowel on the floor, one person after the other. They stood in a circle and tried this at different speeds. Then the challenge turned to keeping the rhythm steady without the aid of visual feedback, that is with their eyes closed and their backs to the circle. Even some of the teachers had trouble with this one, as it demanded sharp listening skills and an acute sense of rhythm and timing.

Still other rhythmic activities involve the use of drama along with movement. One very popular activity is pantomime. One child narrates a story and assigns roles to the other children, and they in turn act out the story in pantomime as it unfolds. These free-flowing dramatic episodes can last anywhere from a couple of minutes to the better part of an hour. The themes of these stories make much use of fantasy, and the imaginative plots typically involve groups of animals, or perhaps monsters, robots, or some TV-inspired topic. Some children enjoy playing the role of the narrator and ask to do a pantomime frequently. Others are a bit more shy, though most children try it at least once.

I cannot help but think back to the gym classes that were a part of my own schooling. For the most part, being in those classes was like being in the army. The main part of it was calisthenics and drill. Very little in the way of fantasy or music was ever involved, to say nothing of cooperation or trust. And there were invariably “discipline problems”—

some misguided child unwisely testing the patience of the gym teachers. Occasionally we would play one or another sport, but the play tended to be fiercely competitive. All that pent-up frustration and anger from sitting against one's will in uncomfortable desks and chairs in classrooms would be released on the playing fields. For me, it was anything but fun. How different it was from the rhythmic sessions! These Danish children, too, have a lot of energy to burn off, but it is a different sort of energy from the almost neurotic release typical of many schoolchildren at gym or recess. The energy I see expressed in rhythmic is typically energy of exuberance and vivacity, not pent-up anger and frustration. Of course, the school does have its "problem" children, so there are a few exceptions to this, as shall be discussed shortly.

It should be mentioned that the rhythmic sessions, like most activities in the school, are not compulsory. The fact that nearly everyone chooses to attend is testimony to the fact that the children enjoy what goes on in them. It is clear to them that, to a large extent, the rhythmic sessions are Lis's sessions, for she certainly takes a leadership role. But the children are more than willing to accept this—they know that, more often than not, Lis comes up with fun things to do! Of course, the children frequently suggest ideas for movements, games, exercises. etc., as well.

In many ways, the activity in the gymnasium is a perfect example of the level of integration that characterizes community life at the school—integration of intellectual, social, and physical development. By integration, I do not mean what teachers often refer to as an "integrated curriculum." i.e. trying to subsume all school work under one large theme. No, the teachers do not treat these facets of development as separate compartments to draw from and weave into cleverly designed activities or projects. They see development as a totality, as a whole. I have already hinted at how elements of the social and intellectual lives of these children are involved in the activities of the rhythmic sessions, but the level of integration lies even deeper than these examples imply.

As an example of what I mean by a deeper level of integration, let us consider the connection between the activities characteristic of rhythmic and, say, beginning reading. At face value, nothing could seem more disparate than flips and phonics, dramatic play and decoding, leaps and Look-Say. But Rasmus Hansen, who taught at the school during its first ten years, told me about what he jokingly referred to as his "reading readiness test." In reality, there was no test at all—Rasmus would wander into the gym and watch the children at play.

Lis would often have some sort of a game where the children would have to run past each other from opposite sides of the gym. Certain children, however, could not perform this without somehow bothering, nudging, or yelling at the others as they passed by. These were the children who were *not yet ready* to learn to read. They were too self-conscious, too full of angst, unable to keep their hands to themselves. If they attempted to learn to read at this stage, they would probably fail, and then reading would become a problem for them.²⁹

Rasmus, here, is pointing out a simple but profound truth: one of the most important preconditions for learning is that the child must feel at ease with him- or herself. The anxious child cannot focus on, cannot attend to, cannot become immersed in the task of learning to read. It might seem strange to use activity in the gym as a barometer of a

child's "centeredness" or "at-homeness." However, the ethologist Innes Pearse uses precisely the same environment in her report on the activity of children at play in the gymnasium at the Pioneer Health Centre in Peckham, England (more about this later). She sees the structure of activity in the gymnasium as illustrative of what she calls "bionomic order." of "mutual synthesis."¹ and, indeed, of "health."

The child's actions in the gym become like the action of a single cell within the body of its inhabitation. In the gymnasium we were presented with children moving in mutual synthesis so that the action of each was spontaneously interwoven into the pattern and action of the whole.

Here then we had displayed before us a picture of "mutual synthesis" between the child and its environment. Our concept that health is *mutual synthesis of organism and environment* appeared to be demonstrated in actuality by this small group of children in their gymnasium. ... This means that in any study of bionomic order, significant actional relationships will not necessarily be found in any direct structural contiguity between cell and cell, nor between individual and individual, but only in the actional manifestations of the individual in relation to his or her total situation. ...

²⁹Rasmus Hansen. private conversation.

The relation of the child in the gym to the total situation in the process of mutual synthesis recalls the range of the extent of the chemical "awareness" of the cell throughout the body of inhabitation. The cell might be said to have knowledge of its whole, and like the [child], to be at ease, "at home" in it, "familiar" with it.³⁰

In a similar way, Rasmus was able to judge the "at-homeness" of children by observing them at play in the gymnasium, and thus to appraise whether "healthy" conditions for learning were present. For Rasmus, as well as for Pearse, such things as "reading problems"—in the vast majority of cases—did not indicate anything wrong with the child's brain or even anything contained within the child. Rather, they were symptomatic of an *unhealthy relationship* between a child and his or her environment. George Dennison makes precisely the same point, drawing on his own work with deeply troubled and alienated youths at the First Street School (see Introduction). In the following passage, Dennison discusses Jose's "reading problem."

Jose's reading problem is Jose. Or to put it another way there is no such thing as a reading problem. Jose hates books, schools, and teachers, and among a hundred other insufficiencies—*all of a piece*—he cannot read. Is this a reading problem?

A reading problem, in short, is not a fact of life, but a fact of school administration. It does not describe Jose, but describes the action performed by the school, i.e., the action of ignoring everything about Jose except his response to printed letters. ...

Now what are Jose's problems? One of them, certainly, is the fact that he cannot read. But this problem is obviously caused by other, more fundamental problems; indeed, his failure to read should not be described as a problem at all, but a symptom. We need only to look at Jose to see what his problems are: shame, fear, resentment, rejection of others and of himself, anxiety, self-contempt, loneliness. None of these were caused by the difficulty of reading printed words....

³⁰Innes Pearse, *The Quality of Life: The Peckham Approach to Human Ethology* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1979)

When I used to sit beside Jose and watch him struggling with printed words. I was always struck by the fact that he had such difficulty in even *seeing* them. I knew from medical reports that his eyes were all right. It was clear that his physical difficulties were the sign of a terrible conflict. On the one hand he did not *want* to see the words, did not want to focus his eyes on them, bend his head to them, and hold his head in place. On the other hand he wanted to learn to read again, and so he forced himself to perform these actions. But the conflict was visible. It was as if a barrier of smoked glass had been interposed between himself and the words: he moved his head here and there, squinted, widened his eyes, passed his hand across his forehead. The barrier, of course, consisted of the chronic emotions I have already mentioned: resentment, shame, self-contempt, etc. But how does one remove such a barrier? Obviously it cannot be done in one little corner of a boy's life at school. It must be done throughout his life at school. Nor can these chronic emotions be removed as if they were cysts, tumors, or splinters. Resentment can only be made to yield by supporting the growth of trust and by multiplying incidents of satisfaction; shame, similarly will not vanish except as self-respect takes its place. Nor will embarrassment go away simply by proving to the child that there is no need for embarrassment; it must be replaced by confidence and by a more generous regard for other persons.”

Trust, satisfaction, self-respect, regard for other persons.. these are the very things that lie at the heart of the activity in the gym, indeed, at the heart of the community as a whole. On occasion, when a child who “was not yet ready”¹ to learn to read would come and ask Rasmus for “reading lessons” (perhaps out of parental pressure) Rasmus would take the child by the hand and say, “Let's see what's going on in the gym.” Chances were that something interesting was going on, and Rasmus would encourage the child to get involved. “The reading can wait for another time.” he would suggest—words the child, in most cases, was only too happy to hear. There are very few schools where I could imagine this happening— a teacher effectively saying to a child, “Reading can wait, I think you should play more.” But it was precisely because Rasmus did say such things that the children were eventually able to learn, and learn swiftly and well. Rasmus knew that the positive engagement with others, the confidence and higher self-esteem that comes from greater control of one's body, and the loosening of tensions trapped in stiff bodily joints and muscles that would come from involvement in rhythmic and play would help dissolve the “barrier of smoked glass” and thus enable the child's powers for learning to express themselves again. In the language of the ethologist, a condition of “health” would be restored between a child and his or her environment.

³¹Dennison, *The Lives of Children*

Creative Activity

A significant part of the playful activity that goes on at *Friskolen 70* is of a creative or productive nature. What distinguishes this sort of play from the other forms we have already discussed is that it tends to result in a creative product: a piece of artwork, some sort of handicraft, or a performance. But like the other forms of play, these creative endeavors also provide outlets for the children's fertile imaginations. The structure of these activities comes from the fact that they employ the use of specific materials in specific ways. That is to say, there is structure inherent in the process of artistic creation itself.

In far too many schools, art is considered to be a frill, enrichment, an elective, something extra-curricular, or at any rate something ancillary or secondary to the main business of school. A casual visitor might mistake *Friskolen 70* for an art school, since the children spend very much of their time occupied with some form of art, music, or drama. Of course, the purpose of the school is not to train artists (nor really to “train” at all). They do not tout an “arts-based” curriculum or “art-centered” system of education. Art is not pursued as a means, but as an end in itself. The arts occupy a prominent position in the school simply because the community places a premium on creative activity in general: on making things, doing things, acquiring skills, and on freedom of expression. John Dewey maintained that art ought to occupy a place at the center of a school’s *social life*, because he saw artistic and craft-oriented endeavors as central to community life itself. In his essay “The School and Society” of 1899, he wrote:

We must conceive of work in wood and metal, weaving, sewing, and cooking as methods of life, not as distinct studies. We must conceive of them; in their social significance, as types of processes by which society keeps itself going, as agencies for bringing home to the child some of the primal necessities of community life ... in short, as instrumentalities through which the school itself can be made a genuine form of active community life, instead of a place set apart in which to learn lessons.³

In a similar sense, craft activity is woven into the fabric of community life at *Friskolen 70*. The wood and metal workshop, modestly equipped with simple but adequate hand tools, is in nearly constant use. as is the sewing corner, where much sewing, knitting and weaving goes on. These activities are not cornered off into an “art period.” Rather, the workshop and sewing corner are out in the open, available for use whenever anyone has the time and inclination to create something. There is no need to wait for a teacher to unlock the door to the art room, since there are no doors. Materials and tools are simply available, ready to hand, accessible.

The same can be said about the knowledge needed to use such tools and to pursue such activities: *it is resident in the culture*. The situation is similar to that of the Brazilian samba school where the younger, less-experienced members watch what the older ones do and imitate them, mimic them. They can see how to use the chisel, how to thread the sewing machine, etc. *Friskolen 70* has no art or shop classes because they are not necessary—no more than talking or walking classes are necessary for infants. The children learn through a process which might be likened to *mimesis*: the art of careful observation, imitation, and iterative refinement of some action or piece of behavior. Indeed, this sort of incidental learning—learning by virtue of being around, and becoming involved with, others in the course of their work—can be viewed as the paradigm for very much of the learning that goes on at *Friskolen 70*.

³John Dewey, “The School and Society” in *The Child and the Curriculum and The School and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956)

When someone came up with the idea of making a hockey stick in the work-shop, there was a flurry of excitement and a great rush for nearly all the boys (and one girl) to make one as well, so as to get a real hockey game going in the small courtyard outside the school building. At first any two pieces of wood were banged together with a couple of nails—such was their excitement to enter the game as soon as possible. But these crudely fashioned sticks soon broke in the heat of the play. After a few attempts at simply

banging them back together again, it became evident that better sticks had to be designed if they were to hold up during the game. The more-experienced woodworkers (which did not necessarily mean the eldest) went to work and came up with a design that was quite sophisticated, if not downright elegant, utilizing screws, washers, and nuts in the place of nails. Some fashioned their sticks with a special groove in the handle, which gave the bottom piece extra support. Others utilized thick strapping tape to keep the nails from popping out. The handles were carefully sanded, as many of the cruder sticks resulted in painful splinters. The less-experienced children watched what the more-experienced ones did, and they incorporated some of these designs into their own hockey sticks. In the process, they also “incorporated” (that is to say, appropriated) many sorts of woodworking skills and valuable design techniques. In other words, they learned.

A quite similar scene could be described in the sewing corner. Toward the end of the school year, most of the girls (and two boys) were preparing to participate in Copenhagen’s city-wide carnival that takes place at the beginning of June. After much preparation and rehearsal of music and dance (more about this later), a marathon sewing event was held over several days to create bright, colorful costumes for the pageant. Again, the more-experienced seamstresses went right to work, creating garments of all different sorts. The others watched carefully and noted what they did. They asked their more-advanced peers for help when they needed it, but otherwise relied on mimicry—on mimesis—to carry out the task. Not that anyone copied another’s design exactly—all the costumes were unique and different—but materials, tools, techniques, and know-how were shared.

The work of Lev Vygotski comes to mind when describing such across-age interactions. In particular, he defines the *zone of proximal development* as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.”¹³³ Vygotski adds,

The zone of proximal development defines those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow but are currently in an embryonic state.⁵⁴

... *Human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them.*

Children can imitate a variety of actions that go well beyond the limits of their own capabilities. Using imitation, children are capable of doing much more in collective activity or under the guidance of adults. This fact, which seems to be of little significance in itself, is of fundamental importance in that it demands a radical alteration of the entire doctrine concerning the relation between learning and development in children.³⁵

³³Lev Vygotski, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1978)

In a certain sense, it can be said that the more-experienced seamstresses and woodworkers were *teaching* others who were less experienced; they were teaching by their example. But they were not intentionally being “role models,” nor were they pursuing their respective activities in *order to* teach. They were doing what they themselves wanted to do in the proximity of others who happened to be younger and/or

less experienced. And, of course, being normal, courteous human beings, they answered people's questions and lent assistance when they were asked to do so. But that was not their "job"; they had other things to do (We shall discuss these issues further in the next chapter.)

While the workshop and sewing corner provide two loci for craft activity throughout the year, a large variety of other activities cropped up at different points in time: drawing, painting, pottery, sculpting, felt making, paper recycling, photography, puppet making, clip art, mask making, and many others. Some of these projects were initiated by adults, in many cases because they were activities the adults were interested in doing themselves. One teacher, Eva (herself a former student at the school), introduced felt making to the school community—a skill she learned from attending an art workshop in her spare time. She enjoyed the activity so much that she thought children at the school would like it as well. The process involved soaking loose wool in a solution of soapy water and pressing it down flat with one's hands. Pieces of colored yarn were often added for decoration. When dry, the wool formed a thick piece of felt, which could then be cut and sewn together to make rather elegant hats, mittens, moccasins, purses, etc. Once the children saw how it was done, they could do it on their own. And they did. While the boys habitually shied away from most of the activities in the sewing corner (out of machismo, no doubt), a few of them did join in with the felt making once or twice.

Similarly, Ane and Estrid introduced the idea of recycling newspapers, which they had read about in a book. It involved soaking newspapers in water and then reducing them to a pulp in an ordinary kitchen blender. Many of the younger children were fascinated by the paper-making process, and they especially loved running their fingers through the luxuriously thick, messy paper pulp. Rectangular frames were constructed out of wood and nylon gauze. With the frames partly submerged in water, they poured in the paper pulp. When the frames were lifted out of the water, a thin, even sediment coated the nylon gauze. When compressed and dried, a neat, rectangular piece of cardboard could be removed from the frame. Again, after showing how the process was done, the presence of the teachers was no longer needed, and the activity went on for about a week without them. This is true teaching: a truly empowering type of help that, as soon as possible, makes the teacher obsolete.

Some activities were introduced by the children themselves. A few children became interested in the colorful graffiti murals that they would observe along various train and bus routes through Copenhagen. A boy and a girl, Rune and Lea, were particularly interested in this style of drawing and painting, and they formed the nucleus of an informal graffiti group. They would often produce graffiti designs (on paper) for their friends. They took great care to master the bold, colorful style of this particular "genre." To give another example, Pil, an older girl with many artistic talents, would occasionally produce a work of "clip-art"—an intricate, doily-like pattern delicately and painstakingly cut out of paper. Her work was so stunning and professional-looking, that it was hard to believe such intricate patterns were produced by a child of twelve. She would typically fold a piece of paper in half so as to make a symmetrical design, draw a pattern on one half, and then carefully clip away the boundaries leaving a lace pattern. Most astonishing was that the patterns she created often depicted a scene involving human figures or animals, as opposed to abstract, snowflake designs. Extreme care must be taken to ensure that all the patterns are connected, lest the whole thing fall apart when the paper is

unfolded. Again a number of Pil's friends copied what she did; often producing quite fine results as well.

The fact that children can become so adept and skilled at one or another craft carries a huge importance in terms of the development of self-worth, self-esteem, and self-confidence. Book learning is not the only avenue for success and achievement at *Friskolen 70*. There are many such avenues. Pil's older brother, Nic, is pronouncedly skilled in the wood and metal workshop (certainly more skilled than I). He has a good sense of the various uses of the many tools; that is, he can "think with his fingertips." He also works extremely fast. At one point he constructed a very finely crafted marionette doll out of wood, with joints made out of pieces of vinyl. Then he went over to the sewing corner and fashioned a small parachute for the doll, turning it into a paratrooper. (The gangster-age boys loved it!) I myself was quite impressed at the ease with which he constructed such a clever little toy.

It so happens that Nic is quite a few years "below grade level" with respect to reading. Nic *can* read, though not very well. In a more conventional school, Nic would have every label in the book slapped on his forehead: "slow," "backward," "retarded," "dyslexic," "learning disabled," etc. His entire success at school would be contingent on his ability to read. But at *Friskolen 70*, there are many avenues toward success, and the workshop has provided one such avenue for Nic. He can feel good about himself; he knows that he can do something, that he can be good at something, and that he is not "stupid." And most important, *the other children in the school respect Nic very highly for his talents*. Why should

the eight-year-olds care about Nic's reading ability? Nic can fix their bikes—to them this is infinitely more important. This is not to say that no one is concerned about Nic's ability to read. The teachers are concerned about it, as is Nic himself. But they don't inflate his reading difficulty into a *disability*. That is they don't make the fact that Nic has a "reading problem" into an even bigger problem for Nic to bear. There are undoubtedly many reasons for Nic's reading difficulty, most of them deeply personal and emotional. From time to time I see Nic working alone with Sussie who with great care, works with several such "late" readers. It may take Nic a while to resolve whatever internal conflicts are blocking the development of his reading skills, but at least he does not have to overcome the intense shame and disgrace that he would undoubtedly experience at almost any other school.

The level of integration that was discussed with respect to rhythmic is a feature of many craft-oriented projects as well. Tenja (age 9) has spent several weeks working on a pair of slacks for herself, from start to finish. To accomplish this task, she must deal with numbers and measurement, read the instructions on the pattern, in addition to concerning herself with the actual sewing part. But Tenja doesn't separate these things out in her mind. To her, all of these tasks *are* sewing. She doesn't say to herself. "Now I'm reading, now measuring, now calculating, now cutting fabric..." No: these things form a whole; they are part and parcel of one activity called "sewing." That's what sewing is. Her face shows extreme concentration and rigor. She is focused on the task and on the bits of advice and help she receives from Estrid along the way. At times she becomes frustrated, for the task is taking much longer than she thought, and Estrid is not always available to help her when she gets stuck. Yet, she perseveres over a number of weeks and is finally

rewarded with a beautiful pair of slacks, as good as store-bought ones—no, *better*, for they are of her own craftsmanship and this carries a truly special meaning for her.

Measurements and calculations go on routinely in the workshop as well, and we should not be surprised to find out that Nic is especially fond of mathematics. It is something he can *use*. But arithmetic and calculations turn up in other places as well. A number of girls approached me one day and asked me to help them figure out how much powdered dye they should use to obtain a solution with a concentration of 0.25%. Their wish to color various felt items they had made brought them into contact with decimal percentages! Numbers are also involved in the various accounting tasks associated with managing the school's finances and lunch budget. Taken individually, none of these tasks may seem momentous. But taken as a whole, they carry the profoundly important message—a message absent from most classroom instruction—that *numbers and calculations are things of this world*. These children are less likely to be alienated from numbers and arithmetic since these things are not viewed as alien: they form part of the activities of daily life.

Drama

Drama is a very popular form of creative activity at *Friskolen 70*. Most years, the older children put together a major theatrical production of some sort. During the time I was at the school, they created a play on the theme of “The Seven Deadly Sins.”³⁶ It consisted of seven sketches, each one taking a “sin” as its theme. The children, together with the teachers Peter and Hermann, devised the plot, situation, and setting for each sketch. Some of these scenes were worked out in advance in great detail. Others were more or less improvised with every rehearsal. The quality of these performances was very high, and in a couple of cases, nearly professional. It was clear that for a few of the children, theatre was their “element.”

³⁶This theme was suggested by one of the teachers.

Each sketch had an accompanying song, with the lyrics written by the children. Peter worked together with the children to set their words to music, at times adapting the tunes of a few popular Danish songs, as well as creating a few original compositions. Peter certainly had a large influence on the final form of the music, since he had the guitar in his hands, but each line was tried out together with the children to make sure they were happy with the way the music fit the text. If it didn't sound right, they suggested an alteration in either the text or the tune. It was through this subtle process of negotiation, this give and take, that several songs were created. These songs proved to be very popular with the children, and they would frequently request to sing them with Peter even after the drama performances were over and done with. The songs became part of the school's musical repertoire, and would be sung often at parties, school meetings, while traveling, etc.

Putting together these dramatic sketches contributed to growth in many ways. Perhaps the most obvious was the degree of cooperation that was necessary to bring about such a production. They really had to work together as a group, and not as a collection of individual “stars.” They needed to support each other's acting and had to learn to stay in character even when it wasn't their turn to say their lines. The props and costumes had to

be ready and organized offstage, the curtain operators had to draw the curtains at the right moment, the children playing the piano had to know their parts and be alert for their cues, and the lighting had to be coordinated with the action on stage. It had to be a total group effort or it wouldn't have worked at all.

In terms of individual growth and development, I think of two students in particular. Stine and Kathrine, both twelve years old, had a very difficult sketch to perform. The theme they had chosen to work with was "Envy," and they were to do a pantomime sketch. The plot involved two characters, one possessing a loaf of bread and the other a canteen of water, each growing more and more envious of what the other possessed, yet unwilling to give up what each one had. I watched some of their early rehearsals: they could barely perform the piece at all or even look at each other without breaking into uncontrollable giggles and laughter, their movements and gestures were far too quick to portray very much meaning, their timing was way off and the result was almost farcical. But in the months that followed, a substantial change occurred. Their initial, somewhat half-hearted attempts gave way to a much more serious and intensified effort. Their gestures slowed down, and a sense of timing with the precision of clockwork emerged. They developed an awareness of each other's sense of rhythm and balance. The giggles had vanished and were replaced by dramatic facial expressions precisely fitting the mood of the sketch. They got inside their roles and discovered something important in the process: that acting was something much more than merely moving around a stage or reciting lines before an audience. Their final performance was practically unrecognizable from their first attempts, and Hermann remarked of it: "That sketch marked the maturity of those two girls; they have emerged from childhood."

Two other teachers, Lis and Eva, worked with a group of younger children in putting together a dramatic performance of a somewhat different sort. They produced a type of circus, complete with acrobatics, clown acts, song, and dance. Not surprisingly, the show turned out to be something of an extension of the sorts of things they would do at the rhythmic sessions. Drama for these younger children proved to be a natural extension of something they already knew how to do and felt comfortable with.

Toward the end of the school year, a group of five girls (ages 9-11), perhaps inspired by the drama group of the older children, attempted to stage a play entirely on their own. One of the girls, Tenja, came up with a plot which she claimed was based on a dream she'd had. The plot centered around a girl from a poor family who is teased at school, encounters a thief in her house, runs away and sleeps on the street, and befriends a rich girl. The group of girls rehearsed their play in the area outside the school's office, upstairs from the large room. Tenja more or less took on the role of director at first, since she was the only one who knew the plot, but Maria, who was the eldest girl in the group, also tended to assume a directorial role now and then. An outside observer looking in on the scene would say that the group of girls were just fighting and arguing over who should do what, or who should say what when, or who had the right to tell other people what to do. etc. In a sense they *were* fighting, but to stop there would be to settle for a thin description. Stated more thickly, their arguments were an outward manifestation of a much deeper and more subtle process: they were experimenting with, feeling out, groping for what it meant to undertake a large theatrical project (theirs was to be close to an hour's duration). None of them really knew how to do it. They had all seen plays before, and some of them had even participated in short Christmas skits earlier in the year, but

none of them had a firm idea of what it meant to put together a script, to convey a storyline to an audience, to conduct a rehearsal, etc. All these things had to be discovered along the way. and this process of discovery often involved conflicts, bickering, even tears. There were a few close calls where it looked like the whole performance was going to be scrapped on account of someone “no longer speaking to*” someone else. But their will to carry the project through was stronger than the momentary divisions these squabbles produced. They were *so close* to success, and in their fantasies they could see the play coming together. So after a good night’s sleep, they were usually ready to come to school and try again. Little by little, they *arrived at* a structure for their rehearsals, for dividing the action into various scenes, and for writing down the dialogue (this they asked me to do). Although their performance—before the rest of the school and some of the parents—was not without flaws, these girls had come a long, long way toward discovering by dint of necessity the value of cooperation, organization, respect, and teamwork. The fact that they could carry their self-chosen project through to completion without any adult direction or guidance whatsoever marked an important step in their growth and development.

Music

Possibly the most widespread artistic or creative activity that takes place at the school is music. It should be mentioned that more than half the teachers are musicians themselves, or at least musically competent. The school owns two pianos which are the sites of nearly constant activity. One is located in the music room and the other in a corner of the gym. (These are the only two rooms with doors that close, providing the necessary sound insulation.) The remainder of their inventory of musical instruments includes an acoustic guitar, a number of African drums, assorted percussion instruments (a large marching drum, a tambourine, hand drums, bells, and various samba instruments), several “penny whistles” or metal recorders, and a miniature accordion. In past years the school had access to some electric guitars as well.³⁷

As with the woodworking and sewing activities, there is no formal instruction in music, that is, there are no music classes *per se*. I have never seen a scrap of sheet music in the school. The children, as well as the teachers, all play by ear and they are great improvisers as well. But from time to time, I would see Morten, himself a professional musician, “showing something” to someone at one of the pianos, or perhaps he would be playing something alone in the music room and someone would wander in. Soon a group of onlookers would form around the scene. Whatever it was that Morten demonstrated to that person— some jazz melody or chord progression—would soon work its way throughout the “piano culture”¹ that has formed at the school. Some of the onlookers would pick up enough from Morton’s demonstration to piece together the melody on their own. Morten knows just how much to show so the learner can figure out most of the piece by him- or herself. The fingering techniques employed by many of the children when “figuring things out” might horrify a classically trained pianist, but no one seems to worry about this, or worry that the children might be developing “bad habits.” Proper fingering is something they pick up when it becomes important, when they discover that their own makeshift fingerings place limitations on their ability to play things smoothly. Then they start looking more carefully at Morten’s fingers to see “how Morten does it.”

Before long virtually all the school's pianists know any new piece of music from watching each other practice and play.

³⁷These were either sold, or they were the property of a former teacher.

Morten can claim no monopoly on piano teaching at *Friskolen 70* since anyone who knows something can show it to someone else. I was able to observe this process of “showing” at close range when I spent a few days away from the school together with twelve children and one other teacher. We stayed in a summer house belonging to one of the teachers in the coastal town of Røgeleje. Upon arriving at the house, the first words of the children were “Look! They have a piano!” and they attacked it immediately. Over those few days I saw Gorm (12) teach Sophie (11) the song “Memories” from the Broadway musical *Cats*. She could play the melody easily enough, but she had some trouble coordinating it with the bass pattern. Gorm showed her how to think of the bass pattern in several segments which could be practiced individually. This piece of advice was all she needed. By the end of the second day after many spurts of small practice sessions, she had the song down perfectly and played it over and over again.

Peter, too, contributes much to the musical life at the school through his guitar playing and his exhaustive knowledge of folk, jazz, and rock songs. Toward the end of March 1987, a few teachers suggested that they start each day off with a “morning song” to which Peter would provide the accompaniment. Most children, though not all, found it a nice way to begin the day. Peter made an attempt to vary the songs he introduced to appeal to the fourteen-year-olds as well as the six-year-olds—not an easy thing to do. But everyone sang the same songs together, ranging from nursery songs to sea shanties and ballads. The songs from the drama group were often included here as well. The younger children no doubt learned many new words through memorizing the songs directed at the older children, and at least one older child claimed he appreciated the chance to sing nursery songs again. The other teachers enjoy singing as well, and at one of the teachers' meetings which lasted over a weekend, they sang Beatles' songs and folk songs late into the night. At one moment, Hermann would imitate Dietrich Fischer-Diskau singing Schubert lieder, only in the next moment to lapse into his impression of Jimi Hendrix. The point here is that singing is something the teachers love to do themselves in their own spare time. By singing songs together with the children, they are not just entertaining them; they are sharing a part of themselves. We shall return to discuss the significance of this distinction between entertaining and sharing in the next chapter.

One of the musical highlights of the year is the preparation for Copenhagen's city-wide carnival. The scene, oddly enough, strongly resembles the Brazilian samba school discussed earlier (see Introduction). About seven years ago, musicians in Copenhagen decided to do something to liven up their otherwise pedestrian, 1-2-3-4 music with something a bit more rhythmic. They decided to institute a city-wide carnival lasting twenty-four hours, filled with street dancing and other festivities, coinciding with the holiday of Pentecost. Many of the groups participating in the carnival are of a quite professional caliber: steel drum bands, calypso bands. African bands, etc. And as Papert observed in his description of the Brazilian carnival, some of them have distinct political themes as well. One group I saw staged an anti-nuclear weapon/anti-NATO/anti-Reagan demonstration, wearing costumes frightfully appropriate to this theme.

At *Friskolen 70* the preparations for the carnival procession started about two months beforehand but worked up to a feverish pitch toward the end of May. The teacher coordinating the activity was Eva, herself a talented percussionist. With her help, songs were composed or arranged—in one case the lyrics were written by Ida, a fourteen year old girl and dances were choreographed. As mentioned, bright pink and green costumes were prepared in the sewing corner. In the final days, groups of children (all girls) from several other “little schools” came to *Friskolen 70* to rehearse the songs and dances. They were to form one large contingent or “samba school” of about 50-60 members during the street procession. Extra musicians, including a few more percussionists, a couple of saxophonists, and a trumpeter—many of them friends or alumni of *Friskolen 70*—were brought in to round out the group. It was truly a buoyant and colorful afternoon. Except for two boys in the percussion section, most of the boys at *Friskolen 70* chose not to get involved (again, they probably regarded themselves as being “too macho” to dress up in pink and green costumes and dance around with a group made up almost exclusively of girls). Lis remarked to me at the end of the carnival procession, “It’s too bad the other children weren’t here to experience this. I knew what she meant, for the Danish carnival carried with it many of the positive features discussed earlier with respect to the Brazilian samba school: social cohesion, common purpose, sense of belonging, and cooperation.

The teachers at *Friskolen 70* sometimes talk in worried tones that the school caters too much to individualists that the freedom they provide might prove to be too much on the side of individual freedom. But events such as the carnival, the drama group productions, the school meetings, as well as the rituals and traditions to be discussed in the next section, provide a type of social glue that makes for a true human community as opposed to a mere collection of individuals. They also make for some of the highpoints of the year, at the children’s own attestation.

Evolved Rituals of the Community

Over the eighteen years that the school has existed, a number of rituals or traditions have evolved that form an important part of the structure of community life. These are chiefly rituals that enable the community to run more smoothly and effectively.³⁸ Far from being cast in stone, these community traditions can be called into question if they should cease serving their purpose. The fact that they tend to be renewed year after year is a sign that they seem to be working.

The most important of these rituals has already been discussed: the school meeting. The ritual itself was introduced by the teachers as early as August 1970, but it took the better part of their first year before the meetings ran effectively. Toward the end of their first school year (1971) one of the teachers wrote the following about the evolution of the school meetings:

The school meetings were originated by the teachers, the idea being that each day we should start with a gathering. Before the *lejrskole*³⁹ of August 1970, the school meeting had already become an institution where one could make decisions affecting the community.

At the *lejrskole*, the meetings were misused or neglected. The school meetings were too teacher-driven and too long. Slowly the idea of meetings broke down.

³⁸The Danes don't use the word "rituals" to refer to these elements of structure. This is my term.

³⁹This term refers to a week-long camping retreat that takes place in the summer. It will be discussed in more detail below.

When we returned from the *lejrskole*, we held fewer meetings so as to have a break from them for a while. We waited for the children to reestablish the meetings. During December and January, on account of a strong need for the teachers to address the group as a whole, a whole row of meetings arose containing rather negative concerns from the teachers (cleanup issues, etc.). After another long pause with fewer meetings, there started springing up school meetings of the sort and with the content that we have now: a school meeting whenever there is a need for it: anyone can call for a meeting; all decisions that concern the community are decided at the school meeting.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Willy Schonemann, in "*Skolearet 1970/71*," from the archives of the *Bagstved Ny Lilleskole*, dated April-May 1971.

It was only when the children appropriated the meetings for themselves, i.e. when the meetings became truly *theirs*, that they began to show respect for the authority of the school meeting and began to realize the power and value of collective decision-making. The children had to learn to listen to each other, to wait their turn to talk, to let the person talking finish his or her thought even though they had something to say right away. Though many of these process-oriented features of the meetings were first introduced by the adults, the children seem to have appropriated them out of a shared concern for a well-functioning school meeting—which is to say, a well-functioning community.

It could be argued with some truth that the adults were imposing their own ideas on the children through establishing the school meetings. Paul Goodman criticizes A. S. Neill for instituting self-government at Summerhill along adult-like, parliamentary lines.

When A. S. Neill's kids are encouraged to "govern" themselves, one man one vote, in their court and parliament, he's taking the social contract and political democracy much too seriously; he is imposing adult ideas. This is *not* the form in which kids spontaneously choose up sides in a game, settle their disputes, and change the rules. Kids are far too shrewd to be democratic. They have more respect for strength, skill, and experience at the same time as they protect one another from being stepped on, humiliated and left out.⁴¹

⁴¹Paul Goodman, in the introduction to Paul Adams et al., *Children's Rights* (New York: Praeger Books, 1971)

Even though, as has been noted, the school meetings at *Friskolen 70* differ in format from those at Summerhill, some of Goodman's criticism still holds. It is hard to believe that the children would by themselves institute school meetings to resolve disputes, solve problems, make decisions, etc. But the fact of the matter is that the children do not exist in the school all alone. There *are* adults present—they are members of the community as well. And these adults *do* have ways, structures, means for resolving problems, especially group problems. It is part of their culture. The teachers' own meetings are run along the same lines as the school meetings. As Goodman rightly points out, children do have a respect for skill and experience, and they respect the adults for the skills they have in this domain of collective decision-making. (More about this in the next chapter.) It would be

disingenuous for the adults to keep these skills this knowledge, this aspect of their culture bottled up inside them in favor of children's "spontaneity." It is, however, an open question as to whether the school meeting ritual is something the adults have *offered* to the children, or something they have *imposed* on them.

In point of fact, the adults can do relatively little to enforce the ritual of the school meeting. It could disintegrate at a moment's notice if the children did not want it for themselves. It would become an empty ritual. And, indeed, some school meetings I witnessed were not so harmonious. A few of them practically fell apart. However, on the occasions when someone was continually disrupting the school meetings, he or she was asked to leave *by the other children* as well as the adults. Such a situation is vastly different from a child who disrupts a class in a conventional school. The disrupter or class clown is only doing what the rest of the class would do if they thought they could get away with it. They are usually no more interested in what's going on in the classroom than the disrupter is. (This is why they almost always laugh at the disruption, which, for them, isn't really a disruption in the real sense at all.) At the same time, though, they resent the disrupter—not for disrupting but for *making the teacher* angry, which puts the whole class in a tenuous and dangerous situation.

Since the school meetings at *Friskolen 70* really belong to everyone, the occasional disrupter does not have the secret admiration of the large group. On the contrary that person is seen as a nuisance, as a threat to the orderly functioning—indeed, the structure—of the community.

Other Meetings

There are other meetings aside from the full school meeting that have emerged as rituals. One such meeting is the "eldest meeting" where the 12-15-year-olds meet with the teachers of the school. This meeting takes place every other week after school. It is a chance for these older children to talk about issues particularly relevant to them, for example, how things are going in the various Danish, English, and Mathematics groups, about their transition from *Friskolen 70* to their next school, or about the various apprenticeships available to them (more about this later). But very often they talk about the status of the community as a whole and of their special responsibilities as the older members of the community.

Peggy Hughes, herself a guest teacher at the school during its early years, once emphasized to me quite strongly: "One of the most important things about the school is the balance between the ages, especially with regard to the older children. If it were just a bit off balance, the community couldn't function as it does." The older children have special responsibilities to take care of the younger ones and to make sure that all is well with them. They are on the lookout (as are the teachers) for children who seem unhappy or bored over a long period of time, or children who seem to get into fights regularly and tease other children. These elders are also responsible for the functioning of the food and cleanup teams. The eldest meetings are a time where they can consult with the teachers (and with each other) to come up with solutions to some of the problems and difficulties stemming from these responsibilities.

To be sure, the adults in the community share these responsibilities with the older children, but the adults alone could not possibly handle all the problems and conflicts that arise in such an active, busy, close-knit community. On any given day there are six or

seven adults at the school and they are spread out much too thinly to attend to the entire group of children, so the responsibility is distributed. It therefore doesn't make sense to talk of the teacher/student ratio at *Friskolen 70*, since many of the children often take on the same tasks and responsibilities as the teachers. All the same, there is a danger that these older children—especially the older girls—might take on too much responsibility, more than they themselves know how to cope with. The teachers must be careful not to turn the older children into mothers and fathers prematurely. A delicate balance must be struck between the responsibilities of the adults and the older children. It is a balance that is different for each individual involved. And, alas, it is a balance that is typically found only after making a number of mistakes.

Every week there is a teachers' meeting at the school lasting anywhere from two to four hours. The meetings cover various types of administrative concerns such as routine scheduling, arranging apprenticeships for children, issues from the ministry of education, admission of new children, and financial issues concerning changes in the law which gives them state funding.⁴² The concerns that affect the children directly must be brought up at the general school meeting before any final decision can be made. A large part of the time at the teachers' meetings is taken up with discussing individual children.⁴³ At a typical meeting, three or four children would be talked about in depth. Often a child would be discussed because he or she is having a special problem of some sort. For the most part, these problems are not what one might call "academic" problems. That is, most discussions are not about a child's progress in reading or mathematics, or whether a child is having difficulty understanding some particular concept. Most of the time the talk is about a child's social, moral, and emotional development (which, I might add, is more often than not what lies behind any so-called "academic" problem). If a child is acting in a particularly anti-social way, the teachers try to get at what lies behind the child's behavior. Often one teacher who knows the child in question well will volunteer to have a "close talk" with the child to see if there is some sort of serious problem going on. Sometimes the problem will be related to something happening in the child's home, and in such cases a parent conference might be scheduled (with the child's knowledge and frequently in the child's presence).

⁴²The Danish government finances private schools up to 85% of their total costs. The remaining

At the teachers' meetings, the teachers can be quite direct with each other and at times will come out with criticisms that can sound rather harsh, much as we saw when looking at the general school meetings. It is especially hard for teachers who have been at the school a long time to have the patience to allow newer teachers to try out new things. The older teachers have been down many roads before and have had time to make many mistakes and to analyze them.

⁴³In past years, I have been told, there were usually a few of the older children present at the teachers' meetings. However, I did not witness this for myself during my stay at *Friskolen 70*.

It takes great patience to permit others to make some of the same "mistakes" and to give them a similar chance to learn from them. In addition, some of these "mistakes" might not be mistakes any longer, or the experiences might open up new ways of thinking about situations and courses of action that no one had thought of yet. The voice of

experience can be a help, but it can also be a hindrance. There is a real, palpable tension here, and I could at times feel it quite strongly at the teachers' meetings. These points to an important theme that we will return to in later chapters: *How does a person possessing greater experience relate to a person of lesser experience without lapsing into unasked-for teaching?* The situation is just as relevant among adults as it is between adults and children.

At two points during the year, the teachers hold a special meeting where all the children are "gone through" (as they call it): i.e. their strengths and weaknesses are assessed. The school issues no grades or report cards and this is the closest the teachers come to any sort of formal evaluation. The general progress of each child is noted with respect to the broad categories of intellectual, social, and physical development. These notations are for the teachers' use only, to enable them to help the children more effectively. They are not sent home to the parents nor do they in any way follow the child to his or her next school. If parents want to know further details about their child's "progress" in school, they may set up an appointment with the teachers at any time. Most parents are content merely to ask their own children.

The teachers also have two major planning meetings, one in early December and one at the conclusion of the school year. Their planning takes the form of discussing and developing new ideas and possibilities that can be brought before the children. In particular, at their end-of-year meeting, they discuss how the events of the past year bear upon plans for the upcoming one. They analyze what went well, what did not, and why. They do not go so far as planning specific activities—this is something they must do together with the children. But they do discuss new *possibilities*, that is, how to make themselves into better *resources* for the children, better guides as to what's out there, what's possible, what's worth doing, etc.

Another important meeting is their monthly evening meeting. This meeting is chiefly for the parents, but many of the children are there as well. Each teacher takes a few minutes to summarize what has been going on in the school from his or her perspective. This is followed by an open discussion. The topics of these discussions are sometimes prearranged and have dealt with themes as diverse as "authority" "trusting children." or at times more administrative matters such as adjustments to the school's tuition. After the general discussion, the meeting often breaks up into smaller groups. Here the parents can address concerns relating to their own children, if they want, or perhaps some of the children will demonstrate and talk about the various projects they have been working on during the past month.

Other contact with parents includes a parents' weekend, an "island camping" holiday in the summer, and occasional building maintenance workdays held during the year. A magazine is published by the school each month, the *Skoleblad* and it is sent to all the parents and other members and friends of the community. The magazine contains articles written by parents, teachers, and children. In addition, parents come from time to time and spend a day at the school, either to observe or to participate in some way. A special project was arranged where parents who had lived abroad would come in and talk to the younger children about their experiences in other countries, often bringing pictures, foreign cuisine, garments, or other artifacts with them. Children heard about life in India, Mexico, Japan, and Kenya. These events had a particularly special meaning for the

children whose parents came to the school. They were sharing a part of themselves with their friends.

Food and Cleanup Teams

A very important ritual that has already been mentioned a number of times involves the activities of the food and cleanup teams. While one might think that the issues surrounding the preparation of lunch or routine custodial work would be of minor concern to a school, such is not the case at *Friskolen 70* where they are held to be very important indeed. Eating and cleaning are after all concerns of daily life community life, and take on great importance. I have seen children called away from their Mathematics, English, or Danish meetings to participate in the food team.

The children are divided up into eight teams of approximately eight members each, plus one adult. The school building and grounds are divided up into eight areas; and, for a week at a time, each team is responsible for cleaning up one of these areas, after which the positions are rotated. All the floors are swept, the carpets vacuumed, toilets cleaned, books and magazines set back in place, tools organized, outside grounds swept, etc. One of these areas is the kitchen, and the team assigned to this area is designated as the food team. This team is responsible for planning, purchasing, and preparing lunch for the entire school community, and for cleaning up all the dishes, pots, pans, and utensils afterwards. It is a huge job to prepare lunch for 60-70 people, and the children are quick to complain if it is not done well. “*Darligt madhold!*” (Bad food team!), they say. The food team has a tight budget to which they must adhere,⁴⁴ so it must be very careful in its accounting. Most days the lunch would consist of *smorrebrod*—traditional, open-faced Danish sandwiches—often accompanied by a carrot-apple-raisin salad called *rakost*. Other days, especially in the winter, they would prepare a warm meal, such as rice and meatballs, spaghetti, baked potatoes, warm rice pudding, pizza, tartlet’s, or pancakes filled with marmalade. Everyone sits around large, bright red round tables together with the other members of one’s cleanup team, which at such times resembles a little family unit. It is a scene filled with conversation and excitement. Lunch, and especially the period of time immediately following it, is one of the most lively, energetic, and active parts of the day.

⁴⁴About \$35 for the entire meal (milk was free}, which is not much for that many people.

In the first year or so of the school’s existence, people were expected to bring their lunch from home as at many other schools. There was no distinct time set for lunch and people would eat whenever they got hungry, or whenever they reached some convenient stopping point in their work. Lis Holm writes of how the ritual of the communal lunch was formed:

Our collective meal was also in part a “contrived” necessity, since one could just as well have taken a bag lunch from home. But there were always some children who hadn’t brought lunch with them, and children who hadn’t eaten any breakfast.

Some of us started a common “food club” where we went shopping and ate together each day. At one point there were 54 “members” in the club—yet we would observe that there were hungry children that stood around us while we ate. So we took the issue of a

collective meal up at the school meeting. Only a few parents were against it—"What about the little piece of nougat or the note written on the sandwich paper, or all those other special things?" But by introducing a mandatory communal meal, we could ensure that all children got lunch every day, and such an institution was in harmony with our attitude toward collectivism.⁴⁵

⁴⁵*Holm, Skolen—B0rnenes Samfund.*

This passage reveals something important about the way rituals are created at Friskolen 70. While it is certainly the case that participation in the food and cleanup teams carries with it important messages regarding community responsibility, the rituals were not created "to instill community responsibility" in the children. They were created because people needed to eat and the school needed to be cleaned up! Of course, the precise form these rituals took reflected the values of the community—to be sure, especially those of the parents and teachers. They could have hired janitorial services and kitchen personnel as at most other schools, but that would mean becoming mere consumers, *Friskolen 70* is most definitely a community of *doers*. If there is a job to be done, the first question they ask is. "Can we do it ourselves?"

Other Groups

Other groups or teams were instituted out of practical need as well. One such group is the "economy" or "finance team." This group, consisting of about four children and one adult, takes responsibility for keeping track of the school's finances as far as purchasing is concerned.⁴⁶ The members of the finance team hold the key to the school's petty cash box, and they may disburse payments up to 100 kr (about \$14). Purchases in excess of this amount must first be cleared with the school meeting before permission can be granted. The finance team must also keep accurate records of all such expenditures. It is yet one more example of how arithmetic skills enter into the everyday life of this community.

⁴⁶*Other accounting tasks involving teacher salaries, tuition, taxes, mortgage payments, etc. are handled by the school's secretary and bookkeeper, Annelise.*

On one of the walls in the large room hangs a large bar graph indicating how much money is budgeted for various areas of expenditure (workshop tools, sewing materials, kitchen accessories, art materials, trips, books and paper, *lejrskole*, etc.) and how much has been spent so far. The finance team is responsible for updating this bar graph periodically so that everyone can see where the school spends its money and how much things cost. The school has very little in the way of fancy equipment: no computers, no fancy science laboratory equipment, no television set and none of the usual stock of educational gadgets thought to be "essential" in many schools. They did, after much debate, decide to purchase a movie projector, a couple of electric tools for the workshop, and a photocopier for the office, but in general, the school tries to spend as little money as possible, not only because they don't have very much of it, but because of their attitude or political stance against consumerism.

Many of the teachers and parents at the school are quite critical of a capitalist society based on competition, and they are critical of their society's overemphasis on commodities and consumption. The school avoids spending money on what can

otherwise be borrowed, made, or done by themselves. Thus beer cases and homemade furniture; thus six years of hard work renovating the school building: thus preparing their own lunch and cleaning up themselves; and—most important—thus their attitude toward education itself. They view education not as a commodity or something to be “gotten” but as a mode of being or stance toward life itself. What little money the school does have mostly gets spent on trips (in fact, they spend half of their total budget on trips, including the large camping trip they all take together in the summer). The school does purchase things, of course, but only as a last resort.

A separate group was created for handling the money connected with the school’s lunch. Each month everyone must bring in 70 kr (\$10) for a month’s worth of lunches. Someone from the “food box” group collects the money in a metal cashbox set aside for this purpose, issues a receipt of the payment, and checks off the person’s name on a list. Members of this group are also responsible for dispensing money to the food team when it needs to go shopping, and for performing the necessary bookkeeping that this entails. Children as young as ten years old take on the responsibility for these tasks, and they take the job quite seriously. Dealing with 5,000 kr each month is no joke. Nor is it merely a pedagogical exercise—it is a job that has to be done.

Practical necessity caused other groups to come into existence that were later “ritualized.” Because of its unique nature, *Friskolen 70* attracts a fair number of guests and visitors. They soon found themselves receiving far more requests than they could deal with, and the issue of visitors was taking up too much time at the school meetings. A special Guest Committee was created, consisting of one teacher and three children. Its job was to screen through the many requests before presenting the more reasonable ones to the school meeting. Some of these requests inquired about using the school for psychological observation or experimentation—these were rejected out of hand. Many of those who did end up visiting were groups of teachers or student-teachers, especially from Norway and Sweden, though the school has also had visitors from as far away as Japan, Canada, and the United States, as well as from many other European countries. When guests arrive, they are shown around the school by one or more members of the guest committee. One boy, Christoffer (age 12), proved to be a particularly valuable member due to his impeccable English (which he learned mostly from watching British and American television shows). He took special delight in showing people around the school, wearing his “Tour Guide” badge that he made for himself. The reaction of the guests to the school is nearly always the same: surprise (it wasn’t what they expected), admiration (at how happy and well-behaved the kids are), slowly turning to disbelief (that they couldn’t possibly be learning very much).

Another practical group was the “doctor group.” The children comprising this group are responsible for dispensing first-aid supplies in case of minor injuries, or will accompany children to the doctor or dentist if the need arises. The lengths

to which children will go on behalf of one another demonstrates that altruism is not necessarily foreign to children. One eleven-year-old girl accompanied a boy to a nearby hospital after he was hit in the eye with a snow-ball. The injury turned out not to be serious, but the girl ended up staying five hours at the hospital, mostly waiting. She arrived back at the school, rather upset that the ordeal took so long—she had not had anything to eat all day—but she didn’t think twice about her responsibility to the boy or

to the doctor group. Again, it was a job that had to be done; there were no questions to be asked.

Lejrskole

A major ritual that takes place in the month of August is *lejrskole* (literally, “camp school”). It marks the beginning of the school year after the summer vacation. The entire school, teachers and children, go out camping together for about a week to ten days. It is a time when the children and adults really get to know each other, a time when they—in the truest sense of the word— *live* together. Part of the ritual involves splitting up into different travel groups (bicycle groups, hiking groups, boat-building groups, etc.) in order to make their way to the common *lejrskole* site—often a school or campsite around Denmark or Sweden. These trips, lasting anywhere from four to seven days, are often tests of stamina and perseverance for the younger children, and the older children must take special care to set a pace they can follow (as in the rhythmic sessions) so that no one is pushed beyond his or her limits. The younger children, in general, enjoy such a challenge and many of them rise to the occasion, even surprising themselves with their own achievements. By the time they arrive at the common *lejrskole* site, they have many stories to tell each other.

It took the teachers a few years to learn how much responsibility the children would accept during the *lejrskole*. In the earlier years, the adults tended to do too much: they prepared the food, cleaned up afterwards, arranged activities, etc. As a result, the children—many of whom would have been glad to become more involved—felt it wasn’t their responsibility to help, since the adults were doing everything. The children proved to be very restless and expected to be entertained by the adults the whole time. The placement of responsibility makes a tacit statement of what is expected of people, much in the same way that unasked-for help can immobilize a person’s learning. Jean Liedloff, whose ideas we shall consider more closely in the next chapter, relates the following anecdote on how taking responsibility away from people can breed incompetence.

In a Midwestern American city one winter not long ago, there was a blizzard that completely stopped traffic, and therefore the movement of fire engines, for several days. Accustomed to dealing with an average of forty-odd fires a day, the fire chief appeared on television to beg people to take care not to start fires during the emergency. He advised that they would have to cope with any fires themselves. As a consequence, the daily average dropped to four fires, until the streets were cleared, at which time the number increased to normal.

It cannot be imagined that many of the forty normal daily fires were set on purpose, but those who accidentally brought them about were evidently aware that great care was not really necessary when the fire brigade was quick and efficient. Apprised of the change of placement in responsibility, they unconsciously cut the figure by 90 percent.⁴⁷

⁴⁷Jean Liedloff, *The Continuum Concept* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Inc.

Moreover, the *lejrskole* ritual became more enjoyable and rewarding when the children were given *more* responsibility for making the whole enterprise work. Again, this enabled them to appropriate the ritual, to make it *their lejrskole*. The older children took on the responsibility of helping the younger ones to write letters home, as well as

reading them bedtime stories at night. Several children, in these few days, progressed giant strides in their ability to read and

write, for reading and writing took on a very true-to-life meaning: they were confronted with people who wanted to hear stories and people who wanted to say things in letters to other real people (their parents) who in turn replied to these letters. Clearly these were no mere school assignments.

One tradition that developed at the *lejrskole* over the years concerned the issue of pocket money. During the first *lejrskole* in 1970, the teachers argued very strongly (in a way they later felt was manipulative) in favor of instituting a common money box where everyone's pocket money would be pooled. The idea was of course consistent with their political views toward collectivism, but the children had not yet appropriated nor really appreciated or understood, the value behind these sentiments. In August of 1971, the children argued against the teachers' judgment in favor of private pocket money to be used at each person's own discretion (i.e. to buy candy). Since some children inevitably brought along more money than others, this led to jealousies, bribery, buying one's friends even theft. The following year found the children arguing in favor of the common money box since they had learned their lesson from last year. And thus another ritual or tradition became instituted; another piece of the adult's culture was appropriated. Moreover, it can be said that the community as a whole had learned from its experience, for each year when the issue of pocket money comes up, the community "remembers" the arguments from the previous year. And these arguments are inherited from year to year even though no students remain at the school from 1971. They also inherit from year to year the *positive experience* of the common money situation; that it worked last year that they got enough candy and sweets for the whole group that they avoided the situation of having to compete with or steal from each other, etc. In this way, the school's rituals are created and passed on from year to year, and in this sense the community can truly be said to be a "learning community."

Apprenticeships and Internships

There are a number of rituals connected with the various apprenticeships and internships *Friskolen 70* offers its students. Some of these are devised to smooth the transition from *Friskolen 70* to the children's almost certainly very different next school. When the children get to be ten or eleven years old, many of them start to feel a bit anxious about their eventual entry into a more conventional school. They begin to wonder whether they are "smart enough" to make it in the public school system. They have some vague image of people in other schools spending years doing something called "learning" while they have in the meantime been spending their time ... well ... doing what? Playing, following their interests, doing things ... *living*? It hardly seems like the same thing (and in a very important sense, it *isn't* the same). Some of the children who have come to *Friskolen 70* after having had not very positive experiences at other schools are particularly nervous about going back into such an environment.

To address this concern, a *skolebesog* (school visit) is arranged for children in this age group. They simply visit a school for one week, usually in groups of two or three, to see what one is like. They do not have to do any work there if they don't want to. When they come back to *Friskolen 70* after that week, they spend a fair amount of time talking with

the teachers and with each other about their experience, about how the school was different from *Friskolen 70* and why it was different.

When the children get to be twelve or thirteen years old, they try to *be* a student at another school, often the very school they will be attending in a few years' time. This is the *skolepraktik* (school internship) and it lasts about two weeks. Again, there are many discussions that take place when they return. Written reports of these experiences are printed in the school magazine for everyone to read and learn from.

Some of the children find that they are a bit behind the public school children in certain subjects.⁴⁸ Others find that they are on level. But in certain areas, they are clearly way-way ahead. In particular, many children are struck by how immature their public school classmates seem to be. They are taken aback by how other twelve and thirteen-year-olds tease each other and by the odd separation they observe between the boys and girls in the class. One twelve-year-old girl wrote in the school magazine:

⁴⁸It is interesting that it is only with respect to public school that this issue of "behind" or "ahead" comes up. It does not make sense to use these words with respect to *Friskolen 70*. They aren't running any race there.

I went for my internship to H... School in the fifth grade. I was happy to be there at the start, but gradually it got worse and worse. But now I'm glad I've been there, for now I know how a public school functions, and as I have seen it function, I must say NO THANK YOU! ... I came into the class and everyone was totally wild with playing tricks on me such as pulling the chair out from under me. So I sat next to a small, foreign, working-class girl, but the irritating thing was that she kept whispering into my ear so I couldn't concentrate. Now I'm sorry if I'm losing my patience, but I must say both that they were not very willing or cooperative, and that they were also nasty toward each other.

Another girl found herself in a somewhat less hostile, yet not very stimulating, situation:

Now I have been in the sixth grade at M... School for two weeks. It was very exciting to see how a public school functions. I just think that it was incredible how much of a separation there was between boys and girls. The first day, I didn't talk at all with any of the boys, and I don't think I interested them very much either, whereas the girls asked me questions about everything. I dare say they thought our school is a little strange, and I can well understand why. Their "best" period was gymnastics, though I didn't know why since they were divided up into boys and girls, and all they did was do somersaults and stand on their hands, and then they have a real mean teacher at that. Their worst period was geography and history, not because I don't like those subjects, but because they had the world's meanest teacher for them. He thought he really knew everything and he had a repulsive way of looking out over the whole class while he said, "Is there anyone who can answer my question, or haven't you been listening to me at all the whole time?!"

For the children who feel that they are "behind" in certain areas, they still have a few years left at *Friskolen 70* where they can "catch up," if they want to. I have talked with about thirteen graduates from *Friskolen 70* or the *Bagsvaerd Ny Lilleskole* and they basically have the same story to tell with regard to their entry into public school: They all needed a certain amount of time to adjust to the new situation, but on the whole they

could easily cope with the demands placed on them. Some of them encountered a few gaps in their knowledge, but they could easily and quickly fill these in. Some of them found their later schooling boring, even a waste of time, but not impossible to take. The reason they are able to cope so well lies in the simple facts that they are good at learning, have confidence in themselves that they can learn, have tried many things and thus have a good idea as to what their real interests are, and are good at pursuing and finding out about what does interest them. This puts them in a much better position to get something positive out of school. Also, as has already been mentioned, the children at *Friskolen 70* have spent thousands of hours talking freely with adults and with their peers, talking about things that matter to them, not just answering teachers' questions. As a result, they have become very skilled at using language and at expressing themselves (which accounts for much of what it takes to succeed in conventional school). They also know how to listen, a skill that rarely develops in conventional schools where so much of the talk that goes on is phony, where teachers "hold discussions" about topics in the curriculum, instead of what really matters to them as human beings.

At any rate, no one I talked to had any regrets whatsoever about having had attended *Friskolen 70* or the *Bagsvaerd Ny Lilleskole*.

The teachers at the school made the following remarks, in an interview conducted in 1980 concerning the children's later schooling:

How do your children manage when they enter public school after having been here?

— Yes. I'm thinking especially of Mia. We had a visit from her father a few days ago. She has simply been a blast of fresh air in that class she came into. The teacher thought it was simply great.

— Yes. That's pretty much the ordinary case. Our children dare to ask dumb questions, say "I don't understand" to teachers who are not used to that type of response. And the rest of the class benefits much from this. They dare to set a question mark next to things and don't just do them blindly. They are in a position to help the other children not to be afraid, for example, of going into the Teachers' Room. It is namely that, which many children in the public school are afraid of.

— They are also interested in learning something. They have not become tired of acquiring knowledge.⁴⁹

This last point is important. The Danes have a word which refers to the way school so often drain children of their natural curiosity and inquisitiveness. The word is *skolettraethed*, which literally translates to "school-tiredness." The children at *Friskolen 70* have not been made tired of school; they are not defeated or resigned by it. Thus when they leave *Friskolen 70* to attend another school, they can take that institution on their own terms. Their positive childhood experiences at *Friskolen 70* act as a type of insurance policy, as a sort of savings account from which they can withdraw from time to time to tide them through the sometimes inane experiences associated with public school. They have the inner strength and character to get what they want out of the situation.

Friskolen 70 offers two other forms of apprenticeships for the older children, one dealing with some sort of community or social work, and the other with some type of job or work experience. The duration of each of these apprenticeships is typically two weeks. As part of their *socialpraktik*, children typically serve as apprentices or helpers to

workers in kindergartens, daycare centers, or nursing homes. This experience of caring for other people proves valuable for them, since they will soon assume a similar position as “eldest” in their cleanup group. Many children are particularly interested in various types of work experience, and apprenticeships are arranged with such diverse working environments as automobile maintenance garages, fishing boats, restaurants, shops and boutiques, ferry boats, pet grooming establishments, farms, botanical gardens, radio and television stations, newspapers, transit authorities, and many other forms of work. Again, results of these experiences are shared with the entire community in the form of written reports appearing in the school magazine. In addition to the many trips taken by the children throughout the year, these apprenticeships do much to make the boundary between the school community and the outside world as permeable as possible. *Friskolen 70* may indeed be a haven of some sort, a protected place for children, but unlike Neill’s Summerhill School, it is not an island. It maintains a variety of contacts with life outside the community.

The oldest “graduates” from the *Bagsvaerd Ny Lilltskole* are now in their mid-twenties. What are they doing?—all types of things: some are studying to be architects, doctors, or lawyers; some are accomplished musicians, artists, dancers, or actors; some are skilled carpenters or metalworkers; some are teachers or social workers; some are still figuring out what they want to do, taking odd jobs here and there and trying many different types of work; some are unemployed. It would be presumptuous to attribute any strong causal connection between their experiences at *Bagsvaerd Ny Lilleskole* or *Friskolen 70* and their choice of profession. Their membership in this particular community comprises but one component in all the various factors that contribute to the selection of a career. Furthermore, most of the children continue their schooling when they leave *Friskolen 70* at age 14, which, doubtless, also has some sort of influence. However, I think it can be said that these young people are in *control of their lives*. They are making choices for themselves; they are not merely floating through the system. And it is just this aspect—of living one’s own life—that lies at the core of *Friskolen 70*, as the discussion in the following chapters will show.

Throughout all the forms of community life that I have described thus far, there is a type of logic, form, order, shape, *structure*. The wide variety of activities that take place at *Friskolen 70*—the games, the meetings, the rituals, and the human relationships involved—lend meaning and purpose to a child’s life and support growth and development. The structure we see here is the structure of experience itself, experience *within* a particular social context. To determine the structure, we must define this context, this medium in which children live a good part of their lives. The structure is inherent in community life itself; it is not put there; it is not superimposed onto experience by some superior force. As George Dennison wrote in *The Lives of Children*:

When the conventional routines of school are abolished (the military discipline, the schedules, the punishments and rewards, the standardization), what arises is neither a vacuum nor chaos, but rather a new order, based first on relationships between adults and children, and children and their peers, but based ultimately on such truths of the human condition as these: that the mind does not function separately from the emotions, but thought partakes of feeling and feeling of thought; that there is no such thing as knowledge *per se*, knowledge in a vacuum, but rather all knowledge is possessed and must be expressed by individuals; that the human voices preserved in books belong to the

real features of the world, and that children are so powerfully attracted to this world that the very motion of their curiosity comes through to us as a form of love; that an active moral life cannot be evolved except where people are free to express their feelings and act upon the insights of conscience.⁵⁰

Such an internal order was permitted to emerge and develop at *Friskolen 70* over several years—it certainly didn’t happen overnight. But what led this to happen? What chemistry did they develop? What delicate balance did they strike? What were the background conditions, the fertile soil, so to speak, that enabled a humane culture of adults and children to take root and grow? In the following chapters, a number of important, aspects of these background conditions—aspects relating to authority and freedom—will be examined and discussed.

Chapter 2 Authority

These two things, taken together—the natural authority of adults and the needs of children—are the great reservoir of the organic structuring that comes into being when arbitrary rules of order are dispensed with,

— George Dennison

NO DISCUSSION OF FREE SCHOOLS, or even of relationships between adults and children in general, can make a claim to any sort of comprehensiveness without coming to grips with the issue of authority. What are proper relationships between the young and the old, the more experienced and the less experienced the novice and the expert, the skilled and the unskilled? Do the adults at *Friskolen 70* abandon their authority? In their attempt to be “equal” with the children, do they give up something or hide part of themselves? These are among the issues we will have to come to grips with, examine, and unpack, if we are to gain a better understanding of *Friskolen 70* and what makes it work.

In some sense, the adults at *Friskolen 70* have indeed abandoned their authority, but *only if* authority is taken to mean giving orders to people, or making decisions for them on the basis of rank or power. When adults try to justify the demands they place on children merely by referring to the fact that they are adults, or by giving a justification of “Because I said so, that’s why!” they do a great injustice to children,

There are certainly occasions when adults rightly intervene—even forcibly intervene—in the lives of children, most notably when it comes to matters concerning protection and safety. A small child running out into traffic definitely needs to be stopped and restrained somehow. That one can get run over and killed by a car is not something we want children to learn by experience. Adults don’t run into busy streets; at least, not before looking both ways, crossing with the traffic light, etc., and it must be pointed out to children, as soon as they can understand, that this is something we simply don’t do, and for good reason. It must be said, however, that most children have no intention of running out into a busy street, and the majority of anticipatory reproofs delivered by adults are a form of overprotection. or perhaps just a show of power. More times than I can count, I have seen adults smack children and then scream at them as they might at a dog. “When I tell you to stay here by me, you stay here! Do you understand?!” The

reason for not running out into traffic is not because some adult issues an order, but because it is a dangerous thing to do. When we disguise this fact by pulling rank on a child, by turning the situation into a question not of safety but of obedience to authority, we are asking for trouble. For in such cases, we undermine our real authority of knowledge and experience by replacing it with the petty authority of rank. As a result, children are more likely to disobey such petty orders out of a stubborn clash of wills, and run the risk of getting into serious trouble.

This last point is a major theme of the book *The Continuum Concept* by the psychotherapist and writer Jean Liedloff. She claims that many accidents happen when the energy normally devoted to the task at hand is instead devoted to winning a power struggle and standing up defiantly for one's dignity. The end result is that expectations of disaster turn into self-fulfilling prophecies.

One of the deepest impulses in the very social human animal is to do what he perceives is expected of him.

A simple suggestion like "Don't go where I can't see you!" said with a note of apprehension (expectation) causes much traffic in lost-child departments, and when mixed with a "Watch out, you'll hurt yourself!" promise, a good number of drowning, serious falls, and road accidents as well. Mindful predominantly of playing the part expected of him in his battle of wills with his caretaker, the little challenger is out of balance with his surroundings and his self-preservation system is handicapped. He is thus reduced quite unconsciously to following the absurd order to hurt himself.²

Liedloff's point here is that it is precisely the anticipation that a child will get into trouble that disengages or short-circuits a child's self-preservation system, much in the same way that unasked-for help can impede learning. Innes Pearse and Lucy Crocker, authors of *the Peckham Experiment*, make much the same point, based on their years of observation of children at play at the Pioneer Health Centre, a family club in Peckham, England.

The child's own courage is indicator for it of what action is to be attempted. But where the grown-up, mother, or instructress, or an older child acting as "little mother,"* urges, helps, presses, or cajoles, the child's natural impetus to action and to exploration is confused; its inherent reliance upon itself is transferred to the solicitous busybody who is hanging upon its every movement. It is *then* that the accidents will happen.³

¹Jean Liedloff, *The Continuum Concept* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Inc., 1975, 1985), p. 79.

³Innes Pearse and Lucy Crocker, *The Peckham Experiment: A Study of the Living Structure of Society*

Liedloff spent years observing the so-called "primitive" Yequana Indians of South America, who allowed their babies and small children to play with sharp objects, with firebrands, or near deep pits. These children did not injure themselves in these potentially dangerous situations, Liedloff theorizes, because no one expected them to get hurt; no one prevented them from handling knives and fire, or playing near pits. Lest I be misunderstood, I do not mean to say that children need no protection at all. Yet we must be wary of the kind of protection we provide for children. Putting things out of reach, denying children access to things and saying "No, that's not for you!" hurts their pride.

They want to do things that they see adults do and are indignant when they are not even allowed to try. The explanation “You’ll get hurt” does no good—the child sees quite plainly that adults don’t get hurt. Providing proper protection means being on hand to make sure that children don’t stray too far from the path of safe behavior. It does not mean prohibiting contact. A child must be allowed to discover that fire is hot, but without suffering serious burns. Liedloff’s “continuum concept” is in many ways identical to the theory of self-regulation, discussed by Wilhelm Reich, A. S. Neill, Paul Ritter, and others.⁴

⁴See David Boadella, *Wilhelm Reich: The Evolution of his Work* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1973); A. S. Neill, *The Free Child* (London: Herbert Jenkins, Ltd., 1956); Paul and Jean Ritter, *The Free Family* (London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd., 1959); Bjarne Segefjord

Similarly in Peggy Hughes’s film portraying the *Bagsvaerd Ny Lilleskole*, one can see children using arc welding equipment, butane torches, sharp knives and tools, and playing close to a campfire—safely and confidently. Erik Guldbaek, narrating the film, explains the importance that being allowed to experience these dangerous things carries for the children, things usually denied to children.

The kids are often working with things that seem dangerous. They are welding with gas and oxygen, and, well, it *could* be dangerous because of the high pressure in the steel bottles, but you can get some locks and valves of some kind to stop the fire from going back into the bottles. We have used it, and the kids like to work with things like that, to weld. They welded a carriage when we walked through Sweden. And people come in and look at it, and they get frightened that the children can burn their fingers and get blisters, or when they work in the workshop with their bare feet or in their socks. They might burn a little, but they like to do those dangerous things. The more dangerous, the better, I think. I think it’s the way they make their experience. They go to the limit—How far can we get in this question? They are working with sharp tools, too, the sharpest they can be. Every Friday they come with their knives and want me to grind their knives so that they can be sharp to cut ... paper! They like it, and OK, they get wounded sometimes, but they learn from it. We all learned that. When you know a thing yourself you know where the limit is.

Most children can be trusted to handle themselves in situations involving potential danger, especially if they know that adults are not far away in case anything bad should happen. They love watching the adults and their older peers to know how to act. Liedloff also emphasizes how strong children’s instincts for self-preservation are, provided that they are given the responsibility and the opportunity to mobilize them. A child who has been given commands and orders from day one on how to behave, what not to touch, where to stand, etc., soon learns to rely solely on orders, and in the process immobilizes his or her own instincts. *The child learns not to experience but merely to obey.*

Most of the commands and orders that adults issue to children are not a form of protection from life-threatening circumstances but are a form of unasked-for teaching that psychoanalyst Alice Miller calls “Poisonous Pedagogy.” Miller studied the child-rearing practices of various Western cultures (especially pre-Nazi Germany) and has described them in horrific terms in her book, *For Your Own Good*. The message of such practices is

quite clear: children are weak, helpless, defenseless creatures that must be “toughened up” from the outset to fit into a harsh, cruel, unfair world. Miller writes,

The scorn and abuse directed at the helpless child as well as suppression of vitality, creativity, and feeling in the child and in oneself permeate so many areas of our life that we hardly notice it anymore.

Almost everywhere we find the effort, marked by the use of varying degrees of intensity and by the use of various coercive measures, to rid ourselves of the child within us—i.e. the weak, helpless, dependent creature—in order to become independent competent adults deserving of respect. When we reencounter this creature in our children, we persecute it in the same measures in ourselves. And this is what we are accustomed to call “child-rearing.”

I shall apply the term “*poisonous pedagogy*” to this very complex endeavor. ... The specific facets can be derived directly from [the following] quotations from child-rearing manuals. These passages teach us that:

1. Adults are the masters (and not the servants!) of the dependent child.
2. They determine in a godlike fashion what is right and what is wrong.
3. The child is held responsible for their anger.
4. The parents must always be shielded.
5. The child’s life-affirming feelings pose a threat to the autocratic adult.
6. The child must be “broken” as soon as possible,
7. All this must happen at a very early age, so the child “won’t notice” and will therefore not be able to expose the adults.

The methods that can be used to suppress vital spontaneity in the child are: laying traps, lying, duplicity, subterfuge, manipulation, scare tactics, and withdrawal of love, isolation, distrust, humiliating and disgracing the child, scorn, ridicule, and coercion even to the point of torture.

It is also a part of “poisonous pedagogy” to impart to the child from the beginning false information and beliefs that have been passed on from generation to generation and dutifully accepted by the young even though they are not only unproven but are demonstrably false. Examples of such beliefs are:

1. A feeling of duty produces love.
2. Hatred can be done away with by forbidding it.
3. Parents deserve respect simply because they are parents.
4. Children are undeserving of respect simply because they are children.
5. Obedience makes a child strong.
6. A high degree of self-esteem is harmful.
7. A low degree of self-esteem makes a person altruistic.
8. Tenderness (doting) is harmful.
9. Responding to a child’s needs is wrong.
10. Severity and coldness are a good preparation for life.

11. A pretense of gratitude is better than honest ingratitude.
12. The way you behave is more important than the way you really are.
13. Neither *parents* nor God would survive being offended.
14. The body is something dirty and disgusting.
15. Strong feelings are harmful.
16. Parents are creatures free of drives and guilt.
17. Parents are always right

Miller is saying that the way we treat children has very little to do with protection or safety, but has an altogether different aim: *to show the child who is boss*. “Give ‘em an inch and they’ll take a mile!” is perhaps a fair summary of the sentiment that lies behind all of this. It points to a basic underlying assumption that children would always be up to no good, would always be getting into trouble, would never learn how to act properly or “be social” unless adults kept them in line through the use of threat and force, every step of the way.

⁶ Alice Miller. *For Your Own Good*, trans. Hildegarde and Hunter Hannum

Now, surely this sounds overly cruel and harsh. Yet, I am not referring to sadists here; I am speaking of ordinary people who believe these things and act accordingly out of what they profess and mean to be *love* for children. The rigidly authoritarian parent or teacher has totally convinced him- or herself that all of this treatment is truly *for the good of the child*, that children must be prepared for a harsh, cruel world, and that they will appreciate the value of this when they get older. Such people feel a sense of duty in providing the necessary and important social function of taming the Tribe of Wild Children to learn to do as they are told. How else would they be able to fit into society? But this type of pedagogy is not only poisonous; it is also self-perpetuating as Miller points out:

When children are trained, they learn to train others in turn. Children who are lectured to, learn how to lecture; if they are admonished, they learn how to admonish; if they are scolded, they learn how to scold; if ridiculed, they learn how to ridicule; if humiliated, they learn how to humiliate; if their psyche is killed, they will learn how to kill—the only question is who will be killed: oneself, others, or both.⁶

The adults (parents and teachers) who established the *Bagsvaerd Ny Lilltskole* in 1970 were in agreement that they were not going to take advantage of their adult authority to issue orders to the children or to make decisions for them. Though the teachers were (and still are) critical of many elements of their society, they did not feel that children had to be “broken” to a harsh world. If there were elements of society that they did not like (competition, consumerism, waste, individualism, alienation, etc.) the goal was to try to change these things, to make a society free from these noxious elements rather than to accept them in passive resignation. This is how the teachers expressed their goals in terms of forming a society together with children:

We tried to liberate ourselves from the prevalent norms and conceptions about how a school should be and sought instead to engage ourselves in a long process where we, together with the children and the parents, would figure out how the school should

function, how we would create a milieu that would be nice to be in, *both for adults and children*.

The school is the children's society, where they can experience and learn how one establishes a humane society, where all are on equal footing, where the adults cannot make decisions over their heads, and where they can exert an influence and change the development of the society.⁷

To say that the adults do not make decisions over the heads of children or that they refrain from issuing orders and commands does not mean that they never place demands on them. They do make demands. If a child is doing something or behaving in some way that irritates them, they simply say "Cut it out!" like anybody else. *Like anybody else*—these words are key. Their demands are no different from the demands that children place on each other. The adults did not achieve this relationship overnight—it took a long time before the children realized that they could refuse the demands of an adult, could refuse absolutely, without running the risk of the adult using his or her size, strength, or superior powers of persuasion to force them to comply with the demand. The child certainly might, as with anyone else, run the risk of angering the adult. But even when this situation occurs—and it did occur, the adults did sometimes get angry—the children are not afraid of the adults just because they are adults. Nor are they afraid of the older children, which is possibly even more important. (I can certainly remember being scared of the older children in my elementary school: they seemed huge, wild, and threatening, which made me feel quite vulnerable.) A small child at *Friskolen 70* must feel as if he or she is part of a huge family, with many siblings or cousins and a handful of aunts and uncles—all of whom can be trusted. The image of the school meeting, with the young children sitting on the laps of the older ones, comes to mind; it is the very opposite of threatening.

To say that the teachers at *Friskolen 70* abandon all forms of authority *in toto* just because they do not act as cops or generals would be to opt for a thin, surface-level description. In an attempt to thicken the description and deepen our understanding of this human community, I want to say that the adults at *Friskolen 70* possess a form of authority that they would be very wrong to abandon. This is the "natural authority" that George Dennison referred to in the quote at the beginning of this chapter. It is an authority based not on age, size, or rank, but on such things as experience, skill, and competence. Authority in this sense is not something one uses *on* someone else, but rather something one *invests in* someone who displays superior knowledge, skill, or expertise in some domain or area of activity. The word "displays" is important yet tricky, for we can easily (much too easily) invest authority wrongly in people, solely on the basis of the uniforms they wear, the titles or letters that appear after their name, or other such bogus criteria.⁸ It is often the case that older people do indeed have more experience, and thus natural authority, simply because they have been in the world longer. But this is certainly not always the case. I invested authority in all the children in the school with respect to the Danish language: they were all authorities in the matter (they could speak the language) and I was not (I couldn't speak it). Indeed, one of the best Danish teachers I had was Lis's three-year-old granddaughter. She was just my speed. When discussing natural authority at *Friskolen 70*, one must speak of the skills and competences of everyone in the community, not just the adults.

⁸For a horrifying account on the lengths to which people will go in investing authority in people who bear the external trappings of science, see Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1974).

I have already mentioned the curative influence that children can have on each other, and nowhere is this more evident than when it comes to settling fights and conflicts at *Friskolen 70*. This is also an area that, in most other schools, is handled exclusively by adults who use their authority-of-rank to break up fights and administer punishments. One thing that surprised me at first about *Friskolen 70* was that there seemed to be *more* conflicts there than I had seen at other schools. There are several reasons why this is so. First, the human relationships at *Friskolen 70* tend to be much closer and intimate than at other schools. The children relate to each other more as siblings than as students, and as a result, their conflicts tend to resemble sibling rivalries. Second, the adults in no way suggest that conflicts are bad or that they must be stopped immediately. On the contrary, expression of emotions and feelings is encouraged, not repressed, and this applies to anger as well as to joy. The teachers know that anger, if repressed, can cause serious problems or neuroses that will only be much more difficult to deal with later.⁹ Finally, the children know that neither the adults nor their peers will let them get seriously hurt, or let them seriously hurt others.

Generally speaking, conflicts are allowed to take their course, and on the occasions when a fight results, there is no immediate attempt made to break things up. But people watch carefully. The children can tell—often basing their judgment on their own experience—when a fight is about to take a turn for the worse and run the risk of serious injury. They can tell when ordinary anger crosses some threshold and turns into blind rage. This rarely happens, but when it does, *that* is when someone steps in. There were perhaps two or three instances during my stay at *Friskolen 70* when someone had to break up a fight. And even when this happens, no punishments are administered, no phone calls to the parents are made, no apologies are forced. That is to say, fights are matters of conflict, not authority, and it is the conflict that must be dealt with. I have often seen children—especially the older ones—avoid violence by walking away from a fight (perhaps knocking over a few beer cases in the process). The children seem to learn as they get older that violence does not solve their problems. Perhaps their years of participation in the school meetings enable them to concentrate on and settle the real matter at hand through negotiation, and not with their fists.

⁹ In fact, I have seen the teachers grab some of the younger children who had a habit of leaving the school and going home whenever a conflict arose. They would rather have them settle the conflict than brood in anger at home.

When the notion of authority is reduced to being merely an issue of rank, there is a tendency to lose sight of the deeper, thicker sense of the term: what I have been calling authority-of-competence. To recall Gilbert Ryle's example of winking (see Preface), when thick becomes confused with thin, all winks and twitches are reduced to the contraction of eyelids, and thus they cannot be distinguished from one another. As Geertz writes, "If ethnography is thick description and ethnographers those who are doing the describing, then the determining question for any given example of it ... is whether it sorts winks from twitches and real winks from mimicked ones."¹⁰ It thus becomes important to sort out and distinguish the different senses of authority, just as it was

essential to distinguish between imposed and inherent structure. For if these things are not sorted out in our description, we are subsequently left with a thin, incomplete picture of the subtle dynamics of this learning culture, and this can lead (and has led) to many confusions, misunderstandings, and misinterpretations concerning the nature of authority and the proper relationships between adults and children.

A mistake made in all too many free schools is that in rejecting authority-of-rank, natural authority or authority-of-competence is rejected as well. The two senses of authority are inappropriately bound together and discarded. But in so doing, children are deprived of access to their culture, for adults and their doings are the real carriers of that culture—not some collection of Great Books, as some might think.¹¹ In the absence of genuine contact with adults, children are deprived of the valuable and important information that they seek in adult behavior: cues on how to act, how to live. Alien Graubard, in his study of the American free school movement, writes of how a philosophy of rejection—prevalent in more than a few free schools—deprives children of the chance to grasp their culture, to the extent where they end up retreating from it. At one free school where there were serious problems with drug abuse among the older students. Graubard cites a teacher who denied that his lack of initiative might have been part of the problem.

I don't want to lay my trip on any of these kids. If they really want to learn something, they'll come to me and say, "Look, man, I want to get into this, can you help me?" If they say that "to me, then that's cool. If not. I'm not going to force them. That's a public school

This teacher, it seems, could not conceive of anything in-between "forcing" children and responding to requests for help. But this sort of extremism misses out on all the gradations of valuable contact that do not involve the use of force, seduction, or coercion. The children are consequently left with a vacuum of choice when there is actually very little outward sign of anything to choose from. It cannot be said too many times: avoiding unasked-for help does not mean avoiding all forms of contact. This is a point John Dewey made as early as 1938 when criticizing what he termed the *Either-Or* philosophy of some of the progressive schools in his day.

¹¹As Ivan Illich has written, "The world does not contain any information. It is as it is. Information about it is created in an organism through its interaction with the world. To speak about storage of information outside the human body is to fall into a semantic trap. Books or computers are a part of the world. They can yield information when looked upon. We move the problem of learning and cognition nicely into the blind spot of our intellectual vision if we confuse vehicles for potential information with information itself." — Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (New York; Harper A: Row, Inc., 1973)

A philosophy which proceeds on the basis of rejection, of sheer opposition ... will tend to suppose that because the old education was based on ready-made organization, therefore it suffices to reject the principle of organization in *toto*, instead of striving to discover what it means and how it is to be attained on the basis of experience. We might go through all the points of difference between the new and old education and reach similar conclusions. When external control is rejected, the problem becomes that of finding the factors of control that are inherent within experience. When external authority is rejected, it does not follow that all authority should be rejected, but rather that there is a

need to search for a more effective source of authority. Because the older education imposed the knowledge, methods, and rules of conduct of the mature person upon the young, it does not follow, except upon the basis of extreme *Either-Or* philosophy, that the knowledge and skill of the mature person has no directive value for the experience of the immature. On the contrary, basing education upon personal experience may mean more multiplied and more intimate contacts between the mature and the immature than ever existed in the traditional schools, and consequently more, rather than less, guidance by others.¹²

¹²Allen Graubard. *Free the Children: Radical Reform and the Free, School Movement* (New York; Vintage Books, Inc., 1972)

Again, the error is in saying. “I’m not going to give orders; I’m not going to tell anyone what to do. I’m not going to get in anyone’s way. If they have any questions, they can just ask.” The result is often tragic; adults hovering around with nothing to do arms folded, allegedly “facilitating,” and a bunch of half-nervous, half-bored kids wondering, “What is it that I’m supposed to do?”

By adopting the role of facilitator in exclusion to all else, adults cannot help but hide a part of themselves. In their eagerness not to “lay a trip on the kids,” they sabotage any form of genuine relationship and contact. Children don’t want to relate to “facilitators”—they want to form genuine relationships with real people. Many teachers in free schools are so uptight about intervening in the lives of children that they do not allow themselves to *be* themselves, and this introduces an element of phoniness into their relationships with children. If all an adult does is answer questions when asked for help, it will be hard to find out who that adult really is.

¹³John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York, Macmillan Publishing Co.

I want to emphasize that it is vital to the success of *Friskolen 70* that the teachers are not just facilitators. Of course they do facilitate when asked to do so, but more important, they are themselves doers. They are a very skilled group of adults and they practice their skills right in the school. Morten is in the music room playing the piano, Estrid is knitting a sweater for herself. Eva is making a pair of mittens out of felt. Peter is playing his guitar, etc., etc. Children have a powerful attachment to adults who can do things; it is the source of their natural authority.¹⁴ This point was made by John Holt in his description of the *Bagsvaerd Ny Lilleskole*:

The school is a human community, and a large part of what makes it work is the adults in it. They are a most unusual group of teachers and they are competent in many ways, not just at teaching. Most of them come to teaching after having done many other kinds of work, and having had other kinds of experience, and they bring their competence and experience to the school. They can do things, make things, and fix things. This is important to children; they like to do things and are enormously attracted to adults who can do things. Much of the great natural authority of these teachers comes from their competence. And many of the problems of American open or free or alternative schools arise from the fact that their teachers often have too little competence (my note: or don’t show the competence they do have). Young people often tell me, sincerely, convincingly, how much they like and respect children, and want to work with them in a free school. They are surprised when I ask, “What can you do?” Too often, they can’t do anything; all they have done for years is be a student. But isn’t love and good will enough? No, it isn’t

enough. Most kids, most of the time, will swap a pound of love for an ounce of competence.¹⁵

¹⁴One boy, Anders, was so hungry to learn as much as he could about piano playing that he would practically cling to Morten and follow him around everywhere so as to pick up as much piano knowledge as possible. Hermann, in jest, nicknamed him “Morten’s shadow” on account of this powerful attachment.

This is, indeed, the source of “the great reservoir of organic structuring” that can be found at Friskolen 70. The teachers know and can do things that are important to the children. There is a real danger that I will be misunderstood, for the issues are even more subtle than the above discussion implies. Our description of the role natural authority takes needs to be made thicker still. The danger lies in thinking that “doing things that are important to children” means keeping them entertained, keeping them occupied, or doing things only for the sake of the children; that is to say being “child-centered” in the extreme sense. But this is not what I mean at all. Only in the case where children are locked up in a classroom does it make sense to “entertain” children. (If the children have to spend their time in jail, then a pleasant, entertaining jail is better than a dull, boring one.) But if we don’t lock children up, if we give them the right to say “No, thank you.” if we give them—in the word of the founders of the *Bagsvaerd Ny Lilleskole*—“the right and the duty to manage their own school time,” then entertainment simply falls fiat. It will not do—it is not what children want, it is not what they need.

¹⁵Holt, *Instead of Education*

This important point was stated in somewhat wry yet eloquent terms by author James Herndon in his book *How to Survive in Your Native Land*. Herndon tells the story of how he and a partner, Frank Ramirez, created a course in a public junior-high school. In past years, their students seemed to become engaged in and excited about all sorts of clever projects designed by their equally clever teachers: devising their own system of hieroglyphics, dropping fake bottled messages into the sea from the Golden Gate Bridge, writing imaginary journal adventures as Peace Corps volunteers in exotic lands, etc. Such project-oriented work formed a part of their regular classes and seemed so successful that they decided to offer a special course devoted to this type of work. They called the course “Creative Arts” or “CA.” It was offered for a double period and was team-taught by both Herndon and Ramirez. Moreover, they felt that the children would be more creative and imaginative in doing all those open-education-style projects if they were freed from having to worry about grades, and if compulsory attendance for the class were abolished. The class was advertised as “No assignment, no grade.” and on the first day, the children were given Permanent Hall Passes, which meant that they could leave the classroom any time they chose.

The children who signed up for Creative Arts did not believe any of this at first. They had to be reassured over and over again that, yes, they didn’t have to work for grades, and, yes, the hall passes were real, and, yes, they didn’t have to work in the classroom if they didn’t want to, etc. The results were enlightening: no one wanted to do any of those “fun.” “creative” projects they allegedly “enjoyed” in past years. The students spent most of their time roaming around the halls using their Permanent Hall Passes, complaining that there was “nothing to do” anywhere. It was a while before Herndon and his partner began to figure out what was going on.

After a while, Frank and I, on the edge of despair, began to figure out what was wrong with the ideas that had worked so well in our regular classes. It was very simple. Why did the kids in regular class like to do all that inventive stuff? Why, only because it was better than the regular stuff. If you wrote a fake journal pretending to be Tutankhamen's favorite embalmer, it was better than reading the dull Text, answering Questions on ditto sheets, Discussing, making Reports, or taking Tests. Sure it was better—not only that but you knew the teacher liked it better for some insane reason which you didn't have to understand and you would get better grades for it than you were used to getting in social studies or English. But that only applied to regular class where it was clear you had to (1) stay there all period and (2) you had to be doing something or you might get an F. Take away those two items, as Frank and I had done in all innocence, and you get a brief vision of the truth.¹⁶

¹⁶James Herndon, *How to Survive in Your Native Land* (New York: Bantam Books)

And what is this truth? That one simply cannot tell what children “like,” what is “meaningful” to them, what they are truly “interested” in, as long as they operate within a system of compulsion. All one can say is that children like doing some activity better than receiving the punishments or living up to the consequences (an F, a disappointed look from the teacher, lack of praise) for not doing the activity. Herndon had every reason to assume that the children *loved* all those clever projects in the past. Yet their “love” dissolved into nothing when they were no longer compelled to love.

In desperation, the two teachers tried to revert to their old tactics: *Since* no one was doing anything, they reasoned, *therefore* there would have to be assignments. There was instant uproar and rebellion. The students said they wouldn't put up with any assignments and would sooner transfer out of the class than do all those dumb projects. They (not very subtly) reminded the teachers of their promises made at the beginning of the year. Clearly it was too late for the teachers to go back on their word.

Then something happened that led the two teachers to tap into their natural authority, and this eventually drew the class back together. Herndon and his partner were sick and tired of aggravating themselves over their nearly nonexistent class, and since most of the class was still roaming around the halls of the school, the teachers found themselves with a fair amount of time on their hands. So toward the end of the year they decided to make a film together, which they called “The Return of The Hawk.” It was to be an adventure or mystery film, and they devised the basic plot together over a weekend. Making the film was something that they wanted to do for themselves, something they were excited about and interested in doing for their own reasons.

Frank and I showed up at school Monday feeling great. Were we planning to suggest to the kids in CA How About Making a Film? and hear them say No We Don't Want To, or There's Nothing To Do Around Here, and then try to persuade them into it? ... Hell no. It never occurred to us to wonder whether they wanted to make a film at all. We wanted to make a film ourselves and spend the rest of the year doing it. We didn't want to find out what the kids' notions of film were. We didn't want to find out what they would do with film. We didn't want to inspect their creativity.

Had we wanted to See What The Kids Would Do With Film, we'd have come up with something more constructive—a film about Attitudes And Relationships or the Question

Of Authority and/or Democracy In The Classroom ... as it was, we really wanted to make a Tarzan film but couldn't quite see how it could be done and settled for The Hawk.¹⁷

Before long, though, there were dozens of students volunteering to act in the movie, run the camera, make prop?, devise a script, direct the shots, etc. It turned into a long, involved, rewarding endeavor—one of the highlights of the year. The “organic structuring” that Herndon had hoped for in the beginning had finally taken place. Again, it took a while for Herndon to figure out just what had happened.

If we never quite accepted the notion that the real curriculum of the course was precisely the question What Shall We Do In Here? and that it was really an important question and maybe the only important question, we did finally understand that there was no gold in CA. We did see that if you agreed beforehand not to threaten the kids with grades, and if you agreed that everyone could leave the room at any time without asking you, that you had just entered a New World¹⁶

If, in the New World, the role of the teacher as giver of orders didn't work out (no one had to follow them orders) it was also true that the other role (the one Frank and I had imagined)—the teacher as Provider of Things To Do, the teacher as Entertainer—didn't work out either. For wasn't that just what the kids had been telling us all year in their oblique, exasperating way? What did all that Nothing To Do In Here mean, if not that the kids didn't want entertainers, wouldn't accept them if they didn't have to, wanted the teachers to be something else entirely?

Wanted them to be what? What was the difference between all the grand things we'd thought up for the kids to do and The Hawk? Why, merely that we didn't want to do any of the former and we did want to do the latter. Why should we have assumed that the kids would want to do a lot of things that we didn't want to do, wouldn't ever do of our own free will? It sounds nonsensical put that way. Yet that is the assumption under which I operated for many a year, under which most teachers operate, and it is idiotic. (Does the math teacher go home at night and do a few magic squares? Does the English teacher go home and analyze sentences? Does the reading teacher turn off the TV and drill herself on syllables and Reading Comprehension? Or do any of us do any of those things, even in the classroom?)

Wanted them to be human. Men. Wanted them to define themselves. (Do I define myself as a person who writes fake Peace Corps journals?) Wanted them to stick by Harry Sullivan's rule: Human beings are more alike than not. What you don't do, we probably don't want to do. What you learn from, we probably learn from.¹⁹

There are few lessons that could be more important for schoolteachers to learn than this one. Children don't want things to be done to them. They don't want to be processed, manipulated, “educated.” But they don't want to be left alone either. They are vastly interested in and curious about what we find interesting, what really matters to us. And not only do they want to know about these things, they frequently want to participate and do these things along with us. The little baby seated in the shopping carriage reaches to take things off the shelves in the supermarket not only because the objects are colorful and evocative, but because that's just what everyone else is doing. The same with the small child who types out a stream of gibberish on a typewriter at adult-like speed. The same with the young child who “makes noise” on the piano, with all the gesture and grandeur of a Horowitz or Rubinstein. Children are hungry for whatever authentic cues

they can get from adults—cues on how to act, what to do, what’s out there, what’s interesting, what’s worth doing. But when we turn this—our culture—into a form of processing or programming, into a curriculum, into something one is led through, we destroy the authenticity of our relationships with children and our actions lose their attractiveness. Jean Liedloff underscores this point as well:

To educate, in its original sense, is to “lead out,” but although this may have some advantage over the more widespread interpretation, to “hammer in.” neither way is consistent with the child’s expectations. Being led out or guided, by an elder is tantamount to interfering with the child’s development, since it leads him away from his most natural, most efficient path to one less so.²⁰

But lest we lapse into thin. Either-Or philosophy again—to recall Dewey’s phrase—Liedloff emphasizes that “not leading” does not at all entail stepping out of the picture entirely.

[A child’s] elders do a great deal to determine his behavior by their example and what he perceives to be their expectations, but they cannot add anything to his wholeness by substituting their motives for his own, or “telling him what to do.” Ideally, giving the child an example, or lead, to follow is not done expressly to influence him, but means doing what one has to do normally: not giving special attention to the child, but ... minding one’s own business by way of priority, only noticing the child when he requires it and then no more than is useful.

²⁰Liedloff, *The Continuum Concept*

[A baby’s] main business is to absorb the actions, interactions, and surroundings of his caretaker, adult or child. This information prepares him to take his place among his people by helping him to understand what they do. To thwart this powerful urge—by looking inquiringly, so to speak, at a baby who is looking inquiringly at you— creates a profound frustration; it manacles the mind.²²

All of this can perhaps be summarized in the following way: The child does not want or need to be led out, but let in. This message ought to be emblazoned on the walls of every teacher’s room. Pearse and Crocker highlight this point well in their analysis of the activity at the Pioneer Health Centre in The Peckham Experiment:

Society and the child in the Centre are in mutual relationship to each other. The grown-ups, going on with their own business, continually enlarge the field of family excursion, and the child shares this continuous expansion and makes its own contribution to it. In this situation, the child is never lifted into the egotistical position of being the focus of attention—of either parent or instructor. He is on the fringe of a potent zone of activity to which he is carried by the parental growth and to which he is draw by a dawning interest. And because he is free to move in this body of society, he moves spontaneously according to the appetitive phase through which he is passing to the particular activity appropriate to his own development. Penetrating widely and deeply into such a society, as time goes on the child may well encounter every degree and variety of skill. All these people that he knows—his parents and their friends and acquaintances, his elder brothers and sisters and their contemporaries—become naturally and inevitably his self-constituted demonstrators and instructors,²³

The prevalence of adults at this family club, far in excess to the situation at Friskolen 70, made the Centre as rich an environment as it was. Earlier (see Introduction) Erik Guldback was quoted as describing the Bagsvaerd Ny Lilleskole as “the children’s own world.” But in many ways this remark is misleading, and it points to some of the shortcomings of places like *Friskolen 70*. Again, Pearse and Crocker state this point strongly and well:

There is a good deal of talk these days of a children’s world, but let us make no mistake about it, the child has no wish to be relegated to a world of its own. The world of its parents, of grown-ups, is a place of mystery and enticement to it, and as it grows it longs to share in it more and more.

Surely there are times when children — like everyone — need privacy, as well as occasions when children — like everyone — prefer to spend time with members of their own age group, gender, ethnicity, etc. But when these sorts of decisions concerning freedom of passage and association with others become institutionalized, growth and development are to some extent impeded.

Lis’s Experiment

In the course of my stay at *Friskolen 70*, there was one period when the issues raised by Herndon, Liedloff, Pearse, and Crocker were very much on my mind. During the last two weeks of March, the older children and some of the middle children were away from the school. (This was the occasion of their school visits, school apprenticeships, and the various other forms of social work and job-related apprenticeships mentioned earlier.) This left only the younger children in the school: about thirty-two children, age’s six to ten or eleven. One teacher, Lis, suggested that special attention be given to the younger children during these two weeks, as it would be the teachers’ only chance during the year to be free from the commitments to the various subject groups (Danish, English, and Mathematics) dedicated to the older children. In particular Lis encouraged the other teachers to “give the children’s social and creative development very high priority.”

Since the usual food and cleanup teams would be missing half of their members, Lis suggested that new groups be formed; in this case, four groups with eight members in each. This was done by creating four groups of boys and four groups of girls, and then combining the two sets of four to make four gender-balanced groups. Two teachers were assigned to each group (twice the normal number for the cleanup groups) though each teacher still had one day off a week. It was principally up to the teachers in each group to gather the children together and to help them decide collectively what they wanted to do. Lis meant for each group to be a little model or microcosm of the school as a whole—a miniature community or family unit (in this case, of eight members) that would “live together” during the coming week and decide how they would spend their time.

The degree of success with this endeavor varied widely among the four groups. Each group chose an area of the school that would be its “home,” and the beer cases were adjusted accordingly to define each locale. One group decided to spend their time putting together a circus performance. This was the most successful of the four groups, and the two teachers involved were Estrid and Peter who fit right into the plan. Peter provided the music and helped rehearse the circus acts, and Estrid lent her fine esthetic sense to

transforming the school meeting benches into a large circus tent, in addition to helping people create circus costumes for themselves.

Another group occupied itself with various craft activities. A few children built a miniature harbor using match boxes and pieces of cardboard that were then painted. Some children became immersed in this activity, but others did not. Lis was one of the teachers in that group and she relied on her exhaustive repertoire of games to keep the children from becoming bored and wandering off. But the group did not turn out as she had hoped: they were not all engaged in a collective activity. “We should find something that we can all do together,” she urged them. But in her own case, it did not seem to work.

A third group, which called itself “The Blue Star,” had similar difficulties. A few of the boys in that group were not used to staying in one place for very long. These were some of “The Runners” who had grown used to the freedom to be in motion for large portions of the day. They were accustomed to spending hours filled with fantasy play and “gangster” games. It was particularly difficult for Hermann and Ane—the two teachers assigned to that group—to keep them from sneaking away. One of the older boys in the group, Christoffer, helped in keeping a few of the younger boys together, though almost in a police-like fashion. “Jesper! Where are you going?” he would say. As eight-year-old Jesper slyly tried to sneak away while the teachers were busy. Ane brought some materials with her to keep everyone occupied: some old magazines from which they could make collages. The group later decided to take a trip to the zoo, as the outing would occupy some of the restless ones. But Lis thought that the idea of a trip defeated the purpose of the week. It was taking the easy way out, she maintained— “You can always go on trips, but during this week we should do something here together, create something together.” The other teachers complained to Lis that they didn’t know that trips were “off limits.” It was too late to cancel the trip anyway—the children had already made a decision to go.

The last group, which, for some odd reason, called itself “The Termites,” was by far the least organized. The group had only one teacher, Sussie, and I was the other adult. It was virtually impossible to keep the group together, let alone agree on something to do. Again, this group had several of The Runners as members and they would not stay put. The only activities that gathered the group were lunch and reading a story aloud. Upon hearing of The Blue Star’s trip to the zoo, The Termites likewise planned a trip to the aquarium. But by and large, The Termites were crawling around everywhere, disturbing the Circus group, peeking in on the activities of other groups, or escaping into the music room or the gym. Occasionally they would return to check in and say that there was “nothing to do,” just like the children in James Herndon’s class.

By Thursday of that week, it was clear that something was not quite right with the way things were going. The teachers themselves were totally exhausted— something that rarely happened to this energetic and dynamic group of adults. And they were only dealing with half the number of children they normally dealt with! One teacher remarked how much more aware she was of the extent to which the older children contributed to the smooth functioning of the school. With the older children gone, the adults were left to pick up the slack. They were amazed to discover how much slack there was to pick up.

Though the absence of the older children could account for many of the difficulties the teachers were facing, it seemed to me that something deeper was also at work. This was brought home to me when I noticed an incident that occurred when Ane was working with a group of children on the magazine-collage idea. At one point, Ane was called away from the group to receive a phone call. By the time she came back just a few minutes later, the entire group, except for one girl, had vanished, leaving a mess of magazines, scissors, and glue on the table. No wonder the teachers were exhausted! They had to work so hard to keep the group together, to keep everyone occupied, constantly, that they ran themselves ragged. Even a lapse of a few minutes could cause a group to disperse.

The situation reminded me very much of a passage I had read in one of John Holt's books, *Freedom and Beyond*, where he wrote about a conversation he had with the Norwegian teacher Mosse Jorgensen concerning a problem she was having at the *Fors0ksgymnastt*—an experimental school in Oslo. The school, it seemed, was suffering from an extreme case of teacher burnout. Many of the teachers who started the school were leaving after only a couple of years, utterly exhausted. John Holt writes of his conversation:

After a while I said, "Mosse, there is something very strange going on here. Here are all these teachers, who have taught for years in conventional schools without getting exhausted, saying all the time how they hated the narrowness, the rigidity, the petty discipline, and how they wished they could teach in a very different type of place. So one day they get a chance to teach in this very different kind of place that they have always wanted and after a couple of years teaching they are all exhausted. What's the trouble? Why should this be so exhausting?"

We thought and talked about this for a while. After a while I said. "Mosse, a picture is beginning to come clear in my mind ... I have a picture of a baby, a year, a year and a half, two years old. He is sitting in a high chair, and his anxious mother is trying to get him to eat some dinner. None of it pleases him, he will have none of it. In desperation she tries one thing after another. 'How about a little cereal? Try some of this nice cereal.' The baby turns away, turns his head from side to side, spits the cereal out. 'Here's some yummy vegetables, your favorite. Look at these nice peas, take a bite, come on, for Mommy.' He knocks the spoon out of her hand. 'Here is some delicious applesauce, you know you like that, come, eat some of it. You have to eat otherwise you won't grow up to be big and strong. And it's good—see Mommy likes it. Now you try some.' The dish lands on the floor." At this Mosse begins to laugh, saying, "Yes, I can see that baby. I know what that is like. And, yes, that is exactly the position we are in, I hadn't thought of it that way, but we are just like that anxious mother, and it wears us out." It does indeed wear us out, for the same reason that being a cop in the classroom (except for people who like being cops) wears teachers out. It is not a proper task or a right relationship. It is not a fit position for an adult to be in. We have no more business being entertainers than being cops. Both positions are ignoble. *In both we lose our rightful adult authority.*²⁵

²⁵John Holt, *Freedom and Beyond* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1972)

Lis's two-week-long experiment deserves a closer analysis precisely because it shows how delicate the balance that we must maintain in our relationships with children is, and how sensitive children are to this balance and the subtle shifts of power and authority that

can occur within it. What happened to the “organic structuring” that was supposed to occur when the external, petty, conventional routines of school are abolished? What went wrong?

The children were told that they were free to choose how to spend their time. No specific activities were imposed on them. But on the other hand, some things *were* decided for them. They were divided up into groups—*Why? For what purpose? Based on what?* And once divided up into groups, they had to decide to do something together—*Why? Whose decision was this? Why did they have to do the same thing? What if they couldn't agree?* And they were supposed to stay gathered together as a group—*Why? Who said so? Why couldn't they use the gym, for example?* Why indeed? The situation was almost as if each group were marooned on an island and had to keep itself entertained somehow, with the adults in the role of lead entertainers. But weren't all these constraints artificial? Weren't all these things a matter of someone deciding that they ought to be so?

It is worth taking the time to look at the one exception to the problems that ensued: the Circus group. They *did* achieve the type of organic unity that Lis was hoping for in the other groups. Why? What was different about this particular group? Although the members of the Circus group were joined by a common activity, they were not in fact all doing the same thing, nor even doing things “together.” There was a fair amount of diversity in the circus production: clown acts, magic tricks, “animal” acts, and the role of the emcee, making costumes, decorations, props, and composing a circus song with Peter. It was important that the two adults fit so smoothly into the enterprise and that they really enjoyed the circus themselves. Like Herndon's film project, the circus permitted the adults to be themselves, not entertainers and not players of roles.

Of course Lis knows all these things herself very well, and my reason for bringing up this particular incident is not to criticize her. On the contrary, I was glad that Lis had proposed the experiment as it showed something very important about what makes the school work ... and what makes it fall apart. Lis herself wrote about some of the key issues in her manuscript about the *Bagsvaerd Ny Lilleskole*:

Something we were all in agreement about at our new school was how to work with the children with respect to their views of consuming materials and time. We didn't just want to have cubbies full of books, colored paper, fancy gadgets, etc. with which we could entertain the children. We would not come and say, as soon as a child didn't have anything to do, “Read this,” or “Draw that,” or “Try to.. .” We would rather help them find out *what* they wanted to do and *when* they wanted to do it. We attempted to give them a ^responsible^ attitude toward materials, so that they didn't just use something and throw it away, or perhaps destroy a little here and there without thinking about it.

... One of the girls, who had gone to [another school], for two years, often said: “Oh, I'm so bored!” And we said to her time after time: “So be bored a little until you find something to do, or until someone else gives you an idea.”

Of course, this method of dealing with the situation was not useful in all cases, as children and the particular circumstances are all different. But this girl was taking part in many common activities and responsibilities. It was just that as soon as she was finished with something she became bored. Then she sat down and said, “Oh, I'm so bored!” She could do this right in the middle of a hike in the [woods] among twenty other children.

And she kept on doing it for a couple of years. It was difficult to refrain from just giving her something or other to do to keep her occupied, but we really wanted her to take the initiative herself or to mix more with the other children without immediately coming to the grown-ups.

We were successful at last, and later on she would come to laugh when we talked about it.

During the two-week-long experiment, the teachers temporarily “forgot” some of these important points and had to relearn them. They felt that they had to keep the children occupied with something if they were to keep them gathered together (which they had been told to do). So out came the colored paper, the books, and the rest of it. Of course, some of the children were quite happy to draw, cut, color, paste, etc. (I don’t want to give the impression that everyone was unhappy.) But not all of them were. The teachers ended up feeling guilty because some of the children were (inevitably) bored and wandered around complaining that there was “nothing to do around here.” It made the teachers feel like they were failing. It made them feel inadequate.

During the second week of the experiment, however, something very interesting happened. A couple of the bored, wandering children brought in a collection of plastic rings that could be hooked together to form a long chain. They devised a game with these rings (more or less along the lines of Marbles) where the players would slide the rings on the floor, attempting to knock, and thus collect, each other’s rings. The person who collected the most rings and compiled the longest chain was the winner (or at any rate, winning). The next day, other children also appeared with plastic rings of their own, eager to take part in the game. Organic structuring had taken place after all, though perhaps not in the way Lis had hoped.

The reaction of the teachers to this development was mixed. Some teachers, particularly the more exhausted ones, were glad that the children had found something to do. This, at least, took the burden off of them. Others were less pleased, and took exception to the content of the activity: it was too competitive, not creative enough, not intellectual enough, it required kids to purchase things in order to play. etc. One teacher maintained that playing the ring game constituted a “misuse of their school time,” a response that surprised me in light of the school’s written “framework” document (see Appendix B): “Each child has the right and the duty to manage his or her own school time.” Another teacher suggested that the adults ought to join the children in the ring game before forming an opinion. The situation more or less resolved itself, however, when the older children came back to the school the following Monday. The old cleanup groups reformed themselves and it was “business as usual” again.

But I believe that there were lessons from those two weeks that could be helpful and important to some of the teachers. In a way, the situation with the four groups of younger children constituted a magnified or rarified version of the dissatisfaction or inadequacy that some of the teachers feel about the school from time to time. The issue of “gathering” the children is a sensitive point with many of the teachers, especially in the case of dealing with The Runners or some of the middle children. Some of the teachers wish that the school were more “together.” that it weren’t so loose, noisy, or unsettled. As one teacher put it towards the end of the school year:

I believe that one of the big problems is that the school hasn't been "gathered" in so many years—in the years that I have been there, it hasn't functioned correctly according to intention, and in the beginning of my time there, the cause was the same: too long a time with too little gathering and control over things.

It seems to me that the frustration this teacher expresses in these somewhat critical remarks is a slightly more diffuse version of the more extreme frustration that was felt during the two-week period. The teacher, in trying to gain control, to gather a group together, to keep everyone busy and happy is simply taking on too much. The problem is set up wrongly and the expectations are too high. As John Holt pointed out, "It is not a proper task or right relationship. It is not a fit position for an adult to be in." George Dennison makes the same point in a slightly different way.

But how does a teacher, deprived of the familiar disciplinary routines, maintain order in his classroom? The answer is, he does not. Nor should he. What we call order, in this context, does not deserve that name at all; it is not a coherent relationship of parts to whole, but a suppression of vital differences. Nor does the removal of suppression lead to chaos, but to cyclical alterations of individual and group interests, of which the former are noisy (though rarely irrational) and the latter quiet ... The principle of order lies in the persons

Or in the case of Friskolen 70, the principle of order lies both in the individual persons and in the community as a whole. It is not the teachers in the end who tame The Terrorists, but the whole community. Likewise, The Runners eventually stop running. Some might need to run longer than others, but they do eventually stop. What makes them stop? It is hard to say. Maybe running is something they just need to outgrow. But I believe the older children play an important role here. Their contribution lies not so much in terms of specific actions they take, but in the sort of behavior they model for their younger peers. As The Runners grow older, they start to identify more and more with the older children. They notice what these older children do, the responsibilities they have, the way they act. This is a natural process: a normal, healthy child wants to grow up and will look to engage in activities with his or her older peers to facilitate this process. The process is further strengthened if the older children are aware of the role they play and invite the slightly younger ones to participate in activities that help them assert their maturity, that give them their bearings, so to speak. Rasmus Hansen stressed this very point in a memo addressed to his colleagues at the Bagsvaerd Ny Lilleskole.

Do we realize that we have several "problem" children, and do we draw any consequences from this? Do we realize that the older children who are aware of this can be a fantastic help in dealing with them? Do we take note of which of the older children are aware, and which are not?

The problems that aggravate some of the teachers at Friskolen 70 from time to time would certainly be much more severe if the children were separated into classes according to age. There would be little or no chance for the positive, curative influence of the older children to have an effect, and the teacher in turn would have to accept even more responsibility for the ignoble task of dragging or coercing the children towards maturity.

Finally, any discussion of authority at Friskolen 70 must inevitably draw our attention once again to the school meeting. The teachers as early as 1970 wrote in their “framework” document:

The school meeting (children, teachers, and others at the school) is the highest authority in the school’s daily life, where all problems can be discussed and where decisions can be made about all matters that concern the community.

We have already seen how demands placed on individuals by the entire community at the school meeting—for example, involving cleanup duties—carry much more weight than demands made by any one individual, child or adult. More than once during my stay, I heard a child threaten another, not with brute force or the usual “HI tell the teacher on you!” but with “I’ll take it up at the school meeting!” This is enough to make a child stop and think.

Where does the authority of the school meeting come from? Why does its voice speak so loudly and penetrate so well? The authority of the school meeting derives from a powerful instinct in the child, as powerful as any other: a child’s need and desire for acceptance by the community. The negation of acceptance—denial, isolation, excommunication—is intolerable. Erich Fromm writes of the power of this need for communion and community:

The deepest need of man, then, is the need to overcome his separateness to leave the prison of his aloneness. The absolute failure to achieve this aim means insanity, because the panic of complete isolation can be overcome only by such a radical withdrawal from the world outside that the feeling of separation disappears—because the world from which one has separated disappears.

Mar,—of all ages and cultures—is confronted with the solution of one and the same question: the question of how to overcome separate-ness, how to achieve union, how to transcend one’s own individual life and find atonement. ... The question is the same, for it springs from the same ground: the human situation, the conditions of human existence.^{2E1}

For this reason, an offender will at times intentionally avoid a particular school meeting rather than face the reprimand of the whole community. Even the momentary feeling of condemnation is too much to bear, though it is always the actions that are condemned, never the person. Unlike at Summerhill School, the community levies no fines for minor transgressions; they are not necessary. The voice of the community speaks loudly enough.

The questions posed at the beginning of this chapter—about the proper relationships between the young and old, skilled and less-skilled—become particularly salient when it comes to the school meetings. It seemed to me that the adults were not in agreement as to how to conduct themselves at these meetings.

Some teachers talked very little at the school meetings, apparently wanting to leave the debate primarily to the children. Other teachers talked quite a bit, feeling that since they are full members of the community—on par with the children—they have the right and the duty to contribute whatever they can to the meetings. But it is possible to abuse natural authority as well. The adults are, of course, very skilled at arguing and can out-argue the children if they want to. I have seen it happen on a few occasions. Furthermore, adults can think more quickly than children and can foresee the consequences of certain

actions (based on their extensive experience) faster than children. The school meetings can easily turn into adult meetings if care is not taken.

This points to a fundamental tension inherent in the notions of authority and freedom that we have encountered several times already. On the one hand, people should be free to be themselves and to express their thoughts. On the other hand, people must be careful that their actions do not trample over other people that they do not infringe upon the rights of others. Sometimes these two ideals conflict with one another: being oneself may come at another's expense. The situation of the adults at the school meetings illustrates this tension. Obviously a balance must be struck between the two extremes of using one's full adult rhetorical powers and keeping one's thoughts to oneself. As this balance is so essential, so crucial, so pervasive throughout the day-to-day life at *Friskolen 70*, it will be the central topic of the next chapter: freedom.

Chapter 3

Freedom

I feel as though I really know myself. I know who I am, what I can do.

— A former student of *Friskolen 70*

THUS FAR WE HAVE INVESTIGATED the concepts of structure and authority in our attempt to make sense of the community life at *Friskolen 70*. But infused through both these constructs is the notion of freedom itself. What is freedom? Don't we all know what freedom is? The word so litters our historic documents and anthems that it would appear we know exactly what the word means.

Although our Constitution and Bill of Rights have provided us with some types of freedom, our society has ways of making us feel free when in fact we are not. Our wants are shaped by the psychic manipulation of advertising, or by the needs of "the system." or by what everyone else seems to want and need: money, prestige, fame, the latest gadgets, designer clothes, pleasure cars.... We do not stop to think where these "needs" and "wants" really come from. Are they in fact ours?

Herbert Marcuse has discussed this point and attempts to distinguish between true and false needs: between needs of the self and needs imposed upon the self that in turn force one to repress the needs of the self for the "greater social good."

We may distinguish between true and false needs. "False" are those which are superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression: the needs which perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery, and injustice. ... Most of the prevailing needs to relax, to have fun, to behave and consume in accordance with the advertisements, to love and hate what others love and hate, belong to this category of false needs.

Such needs have a societal content and function which is determined by external powers over which the individual has no control; the development and satisfaction of these needs is heteronomous. No matter how much such needs may have become the individual's own, reproduced and fortified by the conditions of his existence; no matter how much he identifies himself with them and finds himself in their satisfaction, they

continue to be what they were from the beginning— products of a society whose dominant interest demands repression.

The prevalence of repressive needs is an accomplished fact, accepted in ignorance and defeat, but a fact that must be undone in the interest of the happy individual as well as all those whose misery is the price for his satisfaction. The only needs that have an unqualified claim for satisfaction are the vital ones—nourishment, clothing, lodging at the attainable level of culture. The satisfaction of these needs is the prerequisite for the realization of *all* needs, of the unsublimated as well as the sublimated ones. ...

In the last analysis, the question of what are true and false needs must be answered by the individuals themselves, but only in the last analysis; that is. *if and when they are free to give their own answer*. As long as they are kept incapable of being autonomous, as long as they are indoctrinated and manipulated (down to their very instincts), their answer to this question cannot be taken as their own.¹

¹ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964)

To this Erich Fromm adds that the very structure of our economic system has a way of numbing our sensitivity to the fact that our needs are being shaped at all. This provides the illusion of freedom in the face of social control and manipulation.

Our economic system must create men who fit its needs; men who cooperate smoothly: men who *want* to consume more and more. Our system must create men whose tastes are standardized, men who can be easily influenced, men whose needs can be anticipated. Our system needs men who *feel free* and independent but who are nevertheless willing to do what is expected of them, men who will fit into the social machine without friction, who can be guided without force, who can be led without leaders, and who can be directed without any aim except the one to “make good.”²

The price we pay for “making good,” for chasing after “success,” is that we become alienated from ourselves. We become robots, cogs in the system, someone else’s means. We lose our sense of self; we do not know who we are.

Author Ray Hemmings has written eloquently on this matter with respect to education designed to respond to the “needs of the child”¹—so-called child-centered education. Again, the question arises: Whose needs are we really talking about? Are they really the needs of the child, or are they needs imposed upon the child? As it turns out these are indeed complex questions.

Of course, not all a child’s “needs” or “wants” are internal products: they change according to his experience of the outside world. ... [The usual educational tactic is that] of constructing the child’s environment to produce “needs” of the particular kinds which an adult may want him to feel. Usually the educator has more honorable motives than the drug-peddler or even the commercial advertiser in his wish to stimulate some pre-determined “needs” in children. He may consider it his duty to do this in order to provide society with the kind of people (equipped with appropriate knowledge, skills and character structures) that it requires; or, apparently more altruistically, he may see it as the way by which to develop their full potentialities and thus enjoy a fuller and richer life. Even the former motive may be represented as being in the pupils own interests since it is supposed to be for the ultimate benefit of its members that society should function efficiently, and in any case each pupil will, it is said, eventually be happier if he is able to

play a useful part in society and thus maintain a more honored status. On the other hand the latter motive may not be so disinterestedly directed toward each pupil's happiness—quite apart from the fact that the circumstances in which this purpose is pursued as often have the effect of inhibiting the development of the pupil's interests and potentialities, it is always the case that the potentialities which are to be fostered are only those which are approved of and felt to be worthwhile by some other authority or perhaps by the general social consensus.

... If a man is moved to acquire some fairly expensive object it is reasonable to assume that he needs or wants that object; but it may be that it is not the object itself that he wants but the enhanced estimation of himself by others that he hopes will result from possession of the object. Similarly, beliefs may be expressed, values assumed, behavior adopted not for their own sake, not for the direct satisfaction they will give, but for the impression that they are felt to make on others. A man may profess a belief in God or in science only because not to do so would bring him into disrepute among people by whom he is anxious to be accepted. His behavior may not appear to differ from one whose belief is based on true conviction, yet he is likely to find that the belief offers him no substantial support for his actions. He is himself able to distinguish between the quality of his experience when he acts according to assumed beliefs and that which results from beliefs and values that are not of a displaced origin— even if his actions deceive others. If this displacement becomes at all habitual, and especially if the dissociation between actions and feelings is unconscious, leaving only a vague feeling of dissatisfaction as the individual finds himself continuously impelled to act in a fashion which he feels is at variance with his deeper interests, it seems legitimate to talk not only of true and false needs but even of *true and false selves*.³

³Ray Hemmings, *Children's Freedom* (New York: Shocken Books, 1973)

It would be a mistake, I think, to read Hemmings as saying that *all* influences of society and culture are “bad” whereas only the true needs of the self are “good.” Rather, his point is that the two types of needs are vastly intertwined. To be accepted by one's community *is* a need of the self—this was Liedloff's main theme, voiced in the previous chapter—and culture could not perpetuate itself were this not the case. As cultural animals we are, all the time, influenced by the people we come in contact with, in both positive and negative ways. This is unavoidable. But there is a vast difference between being influenced by the *example* of other people and being influenced by the *deliberate shaping and molding* of others; or said more compactly, there is a difference between mimesis and treatment, between emulation and peer pressure. The danger is that we are losing the ability to discern between the two. We are conditioned to “feel free” and are desensitized to the fact, that there is any manipulation going on at all. We are thus kept from “the last analysis” that Marcuse has mentioned. We are not really free to answer the question of true and false needs for ourselves, for we are not ourselves.

Because much of the freedom we experience is of a bogus variety, when we come in contact with real freedom, we tend to fear it, even hate it. We feel as if we are without bearings; we speak of “unstructured” situations, of anarchy and chaos. Why is this so? In his classic book *Escape from Freedom*, Erich Fromm makes an important distinction between negative freedom or “freedom from” and positive freedom or “freedom to.”⁴ He points out that negative freedom brings liberty but also isolation and aloneness. When

“freedom to” lags behind “freedom from” a type of social vacuum is created and the situation becomes unbearable. People look for an escape from freedom back into a more secure sort of bondage. Fromm writes,

It has been the thesis of this book that freedom has a twofold meaning for modern man: that he has been freed from traditional authorities and has become an “individual,” but that at the same time he has become isolated, powerless, and an instrument of purposes outside himself, alienated from himself and others; furthermore, that this state undermines his self, weakens and frightens him, and makes him ready for submission to new types of bondage. Positive freedom on the other hand is identical with the full realization of the individual’s potentialities, together with his ability to live actively and spontaneously.⁵

⁴ For a related yet slightly different slant on this distinction between positive and negative freedom, see Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty” in *Four Essays on Liberty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 118-172. I thank both Howard Bernstein and Ricki Goldman Segall for bringing this reference to my attention.

⁵Erich Fromm, *Escape From Freedom* (New York: Avon Books, Inc., 1941, 1969)

Realizing oneself, knowing oneself. How many of us can say we really know who we are? Isn’t that what growing up is about, or ought to be about? Most of us were not given the time to make this important discovery—and it does take time. We were so busy playing the school game (or perhaps trying to fool others into thinking we were playing it) that we had little time to devote to this important task, perhaps *the* most important task. We have been so busy contending with the demands that others place upon us, so busy responding to, and defending ourselves from, all the molding and shaping, so busy being everything to everybody that we have not been able to be ourselves. And, of course, the school game just leads to other games. Moreover, as Hemmings pointed out, no one can make this discovery for us, no one can draw our potentialities out of us, as it were. The realization of the self is a task each person must do for him- or herself, by trying many things, meeting many people, going many places, etc. This is what is meant by freedom in the positive sense or “freedom to.” Whereas “freedom from” is invisible because it denotes an *absence* of constraint, “freedom to” is the part that *is* visible; it denotes the *presence* of activities, opportunities, things-to-do, places-to-go, people-to-meet, etc. To provide freedom in this positive sense, of course, entails a type of society that does not yet exist, at least not in a modern form: an open society that provides access to all its culture has to offer, for all its inhabitants.

The cultural and political crisis of our day is not due to the fact that there is too much individualism but that what we believe to be individualism has become an empty shell. The victory of freedom is possible only if democracy develops into a society in which the individual, his growth and happiness, is the aim and purpose of culture, in which life does not need any justification in success or anything else, and in which the individual is not subordinated to or manipulated by any power outside of himself, be it the State or the economic machine; finally, a society in which his conscience and ideals are not the internalizations of external demands, but are really *his* and express the aims that result from the peculiarity of his self.⁶

This freedom, this “right to be me.” can be observed in the degree of tolerance that the children at *Friskolen 70* display toward each other. One teacher, Estrid, remarked to me

that one of the most refreshing things she noticed soon after becoming a teacher at *Friskolen 70* was that the children could wear any style of clothing or any hairdo without being self-conscious about it. (And, indeed, some of the children experimented with some rather unconventional styles.) She was impressed that there seemed to be none of the status-oriented appraisals and label comparisons that she knew from other schools. *The children could be themselves*. Indeed, Gorm (12) was not embarrassed to sit down at the piano and practice an excerpt from Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, even though many of his friends at the school prefer rock-and-roll music or jazz. Another teacher, Ane, remarked that when visitors come to the school and see the rehearsals or performances of the drama group, they are impressed by the fact that the boys are not afraid to sing. "They wouldn't be caught dead doing that in most other schools," they would say. And in general, I noticed that the relationships between boys and girls were rather free and unstrained—there was none of the "Ooooh, you touched a girl!" that I remember from my own elementary school days. On the other hand, I have noted that there wasn't complete mixing of the sexes either: the boys generally stayed away from the sewing corner and activities such as the carnival.⁷ They were not immune from the social pressures of machismo so evident in film and TV. (To be fair, I never saw any of the male teachers knitting or sewing either.) Many of the younger girls did make use of the workshop, but this seemed to taper off as they grew older.

But it must be acknowledged that even this positive freedom—the realization of the self—can be frightening to many. The reasoning goes: If people were allowed to be themselves, then they'd be bad people. These points to a fundamental distrust people have for themselves, a distrust that has consequences for our discussion of freedom and its relation to growth and learning. People don't believe in freedom for children because they don't really believe in freedom for themselves. *They do not trust themselves so how can they trust others?*

This distrust in part explains the widespread, nearly universal acceptance of education as a technical act, as a processing, shaping, or molding of other people, especially the young. The assumption behind this is that people would not be intelligent, literate, civic-minded, social, or moral unless society made them that way, by processing them through institutionalization through schooling. A thicker description of this process of intentional molding and shaping, however, would show how it actually backfires: the process of schooling itself often makes people stupid, bored, humiliated, turned-off, apathetic, wasteful, competitive, and inauthentic.⁸ We do not realize that in institutionalizing our children, we are in effect institutionalizing the child in *ourselves*. We were not trusted as children and thus learned not to trust ourselves. School? If it was good enough for us, it's good enough for them. Indeed, our minds have been schooled, our imaginations imprisoned—which turns out to be just the type of retreat into bondage that Fromm has mentioned.

The fear that "freedom would let people do bad things" indicates how little contact most people have had with freedom in their own lives. They can only think of freedom in an absolute sense, freedom with no limits, "permissiveness," or else of no freedom at all. Of course, there is an important middle ground between the two extremes. Freedom without limits or "absolute freedom" is not properly freedom at all but license, and it's dangerous. This important distinction was stressed time and time again by A. S. Neill in nearly all of his books. Yet to his consternation, he would receive mail from his readers

that indicated grave misunderstandings about these ideas. This prompted Neill to write a book expressly for American audiences titled *Freedom—Not License* in which Neill repeatedly emphasized that freedom crosses over into license when one interferes with another's freedom.⁹ Here Neill, probably without knowing it was reiterating the classic libertarian perspective of John Stuart Mill:

The liberty of the individual must be thus far limited; he must not make himself a nuisance to other people. But if he refrains from molesting others in what concerns them, and merely acts according to his own inclination and judgment in things which concern himself, the same reasons which show that opinion should be free prove also that he should be allowed, without molestation, to carry his opinions into practice at his own cost.¹⁰

⁷I have been told, however, that in the seventies there were a few boys who did learn to knit and to weave.

⁸ There is now a wealth of literature that illustrates how schooling does this. See especially: Jules Henry, *Culture Against Man* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1963); John Holt, *How Children Fail*, Revised edition (New York: Delta/Seymour Lawrence, 1964, 1982); Paul Goodman, *Compulsory Mis-education* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964); Jonathan Kozol, *Death at an Early Age* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Inc., 1967); James Hemdon, *The Way It Spozed To Be* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1968); John Holt, *The Underachieving School* (New York: Pitman Publishing Co., 1969); Charles Silberman, *Crisis in the Classroom* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970); Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970, 1971); Everett Reimer, *School is Dead* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1971); Jonathan Kozol, *The Night is Dark and I am Far From Home* (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1975); Roland Betts, *Acting Out* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1978); Frank Smith, *Insult To Intelligence* (New York: Arbor House Publishing, Inc., 1986). Though it can be argued that school leaves no one unscathed, the children who manage to retain something of their curiosity, interest, resourcefulness, etc. are just those children who lead rich lives outside of school, that is, mostly children from well-to-do households with trusting and supportive parents.

⁹A. S. Neill. *Freedom—Not License* (New York: Hart Publishing Co., 1966).

Though the boundary between freedom and license looks simple enough in print, in practice it is not simple at all. And in an important sense, to spell out this boundary precisely would be to deprive people of important freedoms. At the end of the previous chapter, we mentioned the tension and conflict inherent in the notion of freedom with regard to the adults at *Friskolen 70* speaking at the school meetings. A balance between full participation and non-participation must be struck. Consider the following situation: a game of chess played between an adult expert and a child novice.¹¹ If the adult plays using all of his or her skills, the child will become very frustrated, possibly angry, and will feel cheated. The game is not even challenging for the adult—it is simply a massacre. On the other hand, if the adult intentionally lets the child win, the child will know that the game was phony and will again feel cheated. The game becomes pleasurable for both parties when the adult plays just hard enough to give the child a good challenge without rubbing the child's nose in the adult's superior skill. The child *knows* that the adult is more skilled and *expects* the adult to win. If the child really wanted a chance to win (and not let to win), the child would have found someone closer to his or

her own ability. The fact that the game transpired at all must have meant that the child wanted to learn something from the more-experienced adult, to receive a good challenge, and perhaps to discuss something about strategy along the way.

To illustrate further the nature of this balance, this give-and-take on the boundary of freedom and license, let us recall the rhythmic exercise mentioned in chapter 1 where the older children hop across the gymnasium hand-in-hand with the younger ones. The older children don't stop hopping, nor do they hop as far as they can. They carefully regulate their hops so that the younger children can keep pace. The younger children may have to work a bit—they expect this—and the older children realize they have to moderate their hops slightly. As with the chess example, through a process of negotiation a happy medium is found. We have also noted a similar situation with respect to the small groups that form en route to the *lejrskole* site (the bicycle groups, hiking groups, etc.) The older children must set a pace with which their younger peers can keep up.

¹⁰John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1859, 1956), p. 68.

¹¹I am indebted to Seymour Papert for suggesting this example.

Likewise, the children expect the adults to have opinions at the school meetings, and, for the most part, they are eager to hear what these are. They also learn much from the adults' style of argumentation. They don't want the adults to hold back their views. But they don't want to hear a whole adult discourse on every issue that comes up either. One of the older girls mentioned to me at one point that she was not particularly fond of one of the teachers, because that teacher "would tell you his/her opinion on everything, whether you wanted to hear it or not." This was also a teacher who spoke up often at the school meetings. According to at least this one girl, the teacher crossed the boundary from freedom into license. Her remark made it clear to me that she understood the logistics of this boundary well: one is free to be oneself, but not at the expense of others.

It is for the same reason—this regard for the rights and feelings of others—that the children have responsibilities at the school from which they are *not* exempt. They are not free to abandon the food and cleanup teams. If they did, it would come at the expense of the other children's right to a clean environment and decent food. All the same, it is taken into account that the younger children tire easily or sometimes get bored with such tasks, and it is not expected that they will do as much work as the older children. The older members of the food and cleanup teams must also respect these younger children for who they are. There is a subtle give-and-take here as well, but they know what it is like: they, too, were young once. The same is true about noise: the children can make as much noise as they want as long as it doesn't disturb anyone. Again, it is taken into account that the younger children typically make more noise—have a need to make more noise—than the older ones. Plus, the younger children know that the older children frequently like to read or meet in discussion groups, which necessitates a quiet environment. There are obviously many other such examples. In such a close-knit community, almost anything one does has consequences for other people in the environment. The limits that these places on freedom are real and they exist throughout community life at *Friskolen* 70.

It becomes clear from these examples that freedom is closely connected with the concept of *choice*. And just as there are two orientations of freedom, positive and negative freedom, there are corresponding orientations of choice: one may "choose to" do something, or "choose not to" do something. As we have seen, there are limits to the

choices one can make, in both orientations. There are some things one may not “choose not to” do (food and cleanup teams), and also things one may not “choose to” do (hurt someone, destroy someone’s property, climb on the roof, etc.).

Earlier I described *Friskolen 70* as an “anti-school” Nowhere is this modifier more fitting than when it comes to the types of choices the children may and may not make. The things that are compulsory in conventional schools tend to be non-compulsory at *Friskolen 70*, and *vice versa*. For example, children and adults must participate in the food and cleanup groups because their nonparticipation would affect other people. On the other hand, attendance at the math or Danish groups (for example) is not compulsory, since one’s ignorance of math or Danish does not affect other people.¹² There are, of course, important exceptions to this. If one wants to be a member of the committee that oversees the school’s finances, one must be able to show that one can calculate. While this still does not imply that one must attend Niels’s “basic math” (*grundmatematik*) courses (there are, after all, many ways to learn such skills), it does mean that, in certain *contexts*, possession of certain types of knowledge or skill, or lack thereof, can affect other people.¹³

What is crucial about the choices offered to the children at *Friskolen 70* is that they are *real* choices. A choice is a false choice if in principle one may say yes or no, while in reality one or the other choice is the “preferred” choice. For a choice to be genuine one must feel as free saying yes as saying no, without fear of reprimand or that one might disappoint the person offering the choice. It is only under such conditions that the teachers can learn about the true interests of the children, as opposed to the feigned interests or coerced interests. (And even more important, the children can discover their own true interests.) The anecdote from James Herndon’s book, discussed in the previous chapter, is a case in point. Rasmus Hansen is fond of telling a similar story from the early days of the *Bagsvaerd Ny Lilleskole*.

One of the teachers was approached by a few children who said that they wanted to know some things about China. The teacher agreed to help and gathered all sorts of books, maps, and other material.

¹²Indeed. I have seen children called away from the Danish, Math, and English groups because it was their turn to be on the food team and the time had come to start preparing the lunch.

¹³The story is told from the days of the *Bagsvaerd Ny Lilleskole* how one girl managed to stay away from everything having to do with mathematics for many years. Math seemed dull and uninteresting to her, and she saw no reason to learn it. She refused the offers of the various teachers, who were beginning to grow impatient over the years, to help her learn math—she did not need “help” with something she had no intention of doing. However, at age twelve, she wanted to join the Finance Group along with some of her friends. She approached one of the teachers saying that now she was ready to learn about mathematics. She learned very rapidly and, to her own surprise, she found that she rather liked it. In her later schooling, she went on to take examinations in mathematics, in which she did well.

He was ready to begin the China Unit. After two days, the children who asked to form the group decided that they had had enough. The teacher approached them and said, “What happened to the China group? We have barely begun. There’s a lot more to do.”

The children replied that they had gotten what they were after: all they really wanted to know was how long the Great Wall of China was. Having found that out, they were satisfied and left. Well, we teachers talked a lot about that incident! After that, we were more careful to include the children in planning such study groups.¹⁴

¹⁴Rasmus Hansen, personal conversation.

It was from such incidents—and Rasmus says there were many of them—that the teachers learned to plan activities with the children and not for them. They discovered that unasked-for teaching would get them nowhere. But they would never have learned this valuable lesson had they not permitted the children to say “No, thank you” without fear. It is only under such circumstances that they could obtain *honest feedback* from the children. Under an atmosphere of coercion, they would have been stuck with a group of teacher-pleasers playing the school game. Moreover, the children would have been stuck, too—stuck with having to sit through a whole China Unit when all they really wanted was a small piece of information. The children would have learned that it is not worth their while to ask for help if the assistance comes packaged with a dose of unasked-for teaching.

During my stay at *Friskolen 70*, there were a few occasions where the children provided valuable feedback to teachers by “voting with their feet.” At one point, a number of the younger children were a part of a group devoted to life in the Stone Age. The group went on for quite a while (about two months). Activities of the group included spinning yarn from wool, making butter, making and firing pottery, grinding their own grain—all according to Stone Age methods (more or less). On one day, however, one of the teachers suggested making a timeline of various inventions and discoveries dating from the Stone Age period. She brought in a large roll of paper and some markers with which to do this. One by one, the children quietly and surreptitiously slipped out from the beer case-enclosed area. Before long there were only two little girls left. They drew a few token pictures on the paper and then departed. The feedback to the teacher was clear even though nothing was said: No, thank you, we’re not interested.

In many (though not all) open classroom situations, a child may be free to choose from a selection of activities, but he or she must choose *something*. Frequently the children are required to fill out schedules and contracts as well, to give the teachers some sort of “accountability” that the children are “doing” something. But here again, “doing” in both the thin and thick senses become collapsed together. One of the most important freedoms *Friskolen 70* offers its students is the right to do nothing. Of course, no one really does “nothing”; the mind is always active even if the body isn’t. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, the teachers generally refrain from giving someone something to do as soon as boredom sets in. They know that what looks like inactivity from a thin perspective may in fact be very important activity in the thick sense of the term. John Holt makes this very point in his book *Freedom and Beyond*:

When I first visited the schools in Leicestershire County in Great Britain, I was enormously excited and impressed by them—so much variety and richness of material, so little tension and fear, the children working so independently and behaving so sensibly. In my later visits I remained impressed, but as we all do, I began to see other things— what Bill Hull calls the seamy side. ... The classrooms were full of the most interesting materials. What they lacked was leisure. The teachers seemed constantly to be saying in

the most pleasant of voices, “Get on with it,” meaning keep busy. It became clear after a while that this was the great unwritten rule of these classrooms—you had to be working *on* something, *with* something. You could work on it with other children, and while you were working you could talk. But you could not spend much time *just* talking, and least of all pondering, reflecting, musing, and dreaming. If you did, after a while a kindly teacher would appear with suggestions. ... Deny children— or anyone else—the chance to do “nothing,” and we may be denying them the chance to do “something”—to find and do work that is truly important, to them or to someone else.¹⁵

The activity of “just talking” was a staple of the Bagsvaerd Ny Lilltskole, as can be seen in Peggy Hughes’ film. Rasmus Hansen believes that Friskolen 70 today has somewhat less of the leisurely attitude he remembers from his own time as a teacher at the school during the seventies. He misses the sight of the older children sitting on the bright red lunch tables in the morning, just talking. To be sure, there is still a lot of talking that goes on—the older girls spend most mornings up in the reading loft, reading and chatting—but Rasmus is probably right in observing that the lives of the older children are a bit more hectic in the fast-paced eighties as compared with the more laid-back seventies.

The adults at Friskolen 70 recognize that learning often happens in jumps and spurts instead of a steady stream. The children often become deeply engrossed in something for a while and then suddenly seem to let it drop. This is normal, natural and not a cause for great concern. It is usually not long before they become involved with something else, someone else. Of course, if someone seems unhappy or withdrawn over a long period of time, the matter is looked into more closely.

The lengths to which Friskolen 70 goes to respect children’s freedom and choice can be seen in the matter of school attendance. By law, the school is required to keep attendance records. This means that one of the adults is responsible for marking in a book who is at the school on any given day and who is not. But the school in no way enforces attendance. Children are free to stay away if they feel they have something more important to do elsewhere. They do not have to bring a note or in any way excuse or justify their absence when they return. Nor do they have any work to “make up.” If someone stays away from school for a long period of time, a call will usually be made to the child’s home just to make sure everything is O.K.

Access vs. Exposure

When considering the sort of freedom one finds at *Friskolen 70* it becomes important to distinguish between the notions of *access* and *exposure*. They are not at all the same. The difference between the two terms is closely related to our earlier distinction between asked-for and unasked-for teaching. Access implies putting something within someone’s reach—making something *accessible*. It is up to each person to decide whether or not he or she wants to take advantage of this accessibility. In a way providing access implies making someone an offer—an offer that they can refuse. Exposure on the other hand means subjecting someone to an experience, much in the same sense as when we speak of exposing a photographic plate to light. Unlike access, it is the person doing the exposing who decides who will undergo a given experience. Exposure is something done to you: access refers to proximity, availability.¹⁶

¹⁶Of course, some people speak in terms of “exposing themselves” to something, but this is really what I mean by access.

Exposure is not a neutral event. There are costs associated with exposing someone to something; the exposure itself frequently leaves a residue, a bad taste in one’s mouth. Should we expose children to, say, and classical music? Should we say to them, “Just sit through this one concert so that you’ll know what it’s like. After that, you can decide for yourself whether or not you want to come back for more.”? The problem with this line of reasoning is that first impressions are often lasting ones. A person subjected to classical music might be turned off for life. Of course, there is also a chance the person might be turned on for life. But in the case where the experience turns out not to be pleasant, there is often extra resentment toward the person doing the exposing. And this resentment colors a person’s relationship to the experience itself, as we noted in our earlier discussion of human relationships (see Chapter 1). The great risk involved with exposure is that it is so easy to get the timing wrong. Exposing children to poetry at age nine (or whatever) might ruin poetry for the rest of their lives, just because it came at the wrong time for them. In the case of access—of saying “Would you like to come to a concert with me?”—the person who accepts the offer but does not enjoy the experience will at worst have simply made a bad choice. No resentment is involved.

Insofar as schools are in the business of compulsory education, they are in the business of exposure. For the most part, schools have decided what their students should be exposed to. Even in the case of the junior high or high school that offers electives, it is still exposure. All the student can decide is which course he or she will take: which language, which shop class, which art or music appreciation class, or whatever. But after that decision has been made, it’s exposure all the way. True, such a choice is better than no choice at all. But mandatory selection among pre-packaged commodities is not very much of a choice, as Herbert Marcuse has noted:

The range of choice open to the individual is not the decisive factor in determining the degree of human freedom, but what can be chosen and what is chosen by the individual. The criterion for free choice can never be an absolute one, but neither is it entirely relative. Free election of masters does not abolish the masters or the slaves. Free choice among a wide variety of goods and services does not signify freedom if these goods and services sustain social controls over a life of toil and fear—that is, if they sustain alienation.¹⁷

¹⁷*Marcuse, One-Dimensional Man*

The question invariably arises, “How will the children learn about X if they are not exposed to X?” How indeed? There are many children right now who aren’t learning the things they *are* being exposed to in school. The question itself assumes that exposure is necessary for learning. But perhaps what people really mean when they ask this question is, “How will children learn about X if they never come in contact with X?” This is in fact a question that leads us into the heart of issues concerning access. How accessible is X? Is X something one would ordinarily come in contact with? And what do we mean by “ordinarily”?

Access and Incidental Learning

A major difference between primitive and modern societies is that everything in primitive society is accessible, visible, within reach, whereas there is very much in our society that is invisible, inaccessible, hidden. In his book *Democracy and Education*, John Dewey marvels with a certain degree of nostalgia over the way children of primitive peoples are able to learn so much without explicit instruction, through participation in community life and playful imitation.

[Primitive people! have no special devices, material or institutions for teaching save in connection with initiation ceremonies by which the youth are inducted into full social membership. For the most part, they depend upon children learning the customs of adults, acquiring their emotional set and stock of ideas, by sharing in what the elders are doing. In part, this sharing is direct, taking part in the occupations of adults and thus serving an apprenticeship; in part, it is indirect, through the dramatic play in which the children reproduce the actions of grown-ups and thus learn to know what they are like. To savages it would seem preposterous to seek out a place where nothing but learning was going on in order that one might learn.¹⁸

¹⁸John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Free Press, Inc., 1916, 1966)

The process that Dewey describes here is very similar to what Paul Goodman has termed “incidental” learning, that is, learning by being around people with certain knowledge or skill and, to the extent possible, participating in their activities, in their way of life. I need not point out that this is just the sort of learning we have mentioned so often in our discussion of *Friskolen 70*.

Like Dewey, Jerome Bruner makes similar remarks regarding the !Kung Bushmen of the Kalahari, based on films and other anthropological data he has seen.

Among hunting-gathering humans, on the other hand, there is *constant* interaction between adult and child, adult and adolescent, adolescent and child. !Kung adults and children play and dance together, sit together, participate in minor hunting together, join in song and storytelling together. At frequent intervals, moreover, children are party to rituals presided over by adults. ... Children, besides, are constantly playing imitatively with the rituals, implements, tools, and weapons of the adult world. ...

Note, though, that in tens of thousands of feet of !Kung film, one virtually never sees an instance of ‘teaching’ taking place outside the situation where the behavior to be learned is relevant. Nobody teaches in our prepared sense of the word. There is nothing like school, nothing like lessons. Indeed, among the !Kung there is very little ‘telling.’ Most of what we would call instruction is through showing. And there is no practice or drill as such save in the form of play modeled directly on adult models—play hunting, play bossing, play exchanging, play baby tending, play house making. In the end, every man in the culture knows nearly all there is to know about how to get on with life as a man, and every woman as a woman—the skills, the rituals and myths, the obligations and rights.¹⁹

¹⁹ Jerome Bruner, *Toward a Theory of Instruction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Inc., 1966)

But then both Dewey and Bruner go on to say that, in our complex society, this mode of learning becomes too difficult and breaks down. This is what provides the rationale for schooling. Dewey writes,

But as civilization advances, the gap between the capacities of the young and the concerns of the adults widens. Learning by direct sharing in the pursuits of grownups becomes increasingly difficult except in the case of the less advanced occupations. Much of what adults do is so remote in space and in meaning that playful imitation is less and less adequate to reproduce its spirit. Ability to share effectively in adult activities thus depends on a prior training given with this end in view. Intentional agencies—schools—and explicit material—studies—are devised. The task of teaching certain things is delegated to a special group of persons.

Without such formal education, it is not possible to transmit all the resources and achievements of a complex society. It also opens a way to a kind of experience which would not be accessible to the young, if they were left to pick up their training in informal association with others, since books and the symbols of knowledge are mastered.

Dewey here seems to be saying that children need some sort of advance preparation or prior training before they can make sense of, and share in, “the concerns of adults.” and that it is not possible for incidental learning to occur in “advanced occupations” since abstract symbols (written language and mathematical notation) are frequently involved. And, similarly. Bruner adds:

The change in the instruction of children in more complex societies is twofold. First of all there is knowledge and skill in the culture far in excess of what any one individual knows. And so increasingly, there develops an economic technique of instructing the young based heavily on telling out of context rather than showing in context. In literate societies, the practice becomes institutionalized in the school or the teacher. Both promote this necessarily abstract way of instructing the young.²¹

Other species begin their learning afresh each generation, but man is born into a culture that has as one of its principal functions the conservation and transmission of past learning. Given man’s physical characteristics, indeed, it would be not only wasteful but probably fatal for him to reinvent even the limited range of technique and knowledge required to survive in the temperate zone. This means that man cannot depend on the casual process of learning; he must be “educated.”

But it is precisely because human beings are “born into a culture” that they *don’t have to reinvent* that culture. It has already been invented. Knowledge, skills, art, science, religion, tools, etc.—it’s all there, embedded in the forms of life of a society. There is no need to start “afresh.”

My experience at *Friskolen 70* tells me that Dewey is mistaken in assuming that there is something in the nature of the content of intellectual tasks that renders informal or incidental learning in our society ineffective. Indeed, there are aspects of *Friskolen 70* that resemble Dewey’s and Bruner’s descriptions of primitive societies: close interaction between adults and children, and exploration of roles and ways of life through playful imitation of adult activities and occupations.

I want to argue that the chief impediment to incidental learning is that of proximity, of access, and not the complexity or abstract nature of modern thought and knowledge.

The Dutch psychiatrist J. H. van den Berg highlights the fact that we provide children relatively little access to adult life, especially to the world of work. There is consequently very little chance for incidental learning to take place. He writes:

The child has today become separated from everything belonging to the adult's life. Yet this can only mean that nowadays two separate states of human life can be distinguished: the state of maturity ... and the state of immaturity.

The child has become a child.²³

²³J. H. van den Berg, *The Changing Nature of Man* (W. W. Norton & Co., 1961)

To the eyes of a child, maturity is invisible. In the past, if a child walked through the streets of the town, he could see and hear around him how trades were practiced, one of which he could choose himself later on. The rope-maker, the smith, the brazier, the cooper, the carpenter, they all worked in places accessible to any child; in their houses, in the work yards, or somewhere in the open. Today most trades are shut away in factories [or offices], where children are not allowed. How can a child know what happens there?²⁴

No, a child cannot know what happens there, especially if a child must spend most of the day in school and most of the after-school hours coping with the ever-increasing demands of school: homework, preparation for exams, etc. Yet the irony of the situation is that this lack of access becomes the rationale for exposure. The true work of the mathematician, the writer, the scientist, the historian etc. are invisible to children, therefore they are put in artificial environments—classrooms—where they are exposed to “subject matter.” Our imaginations become locked into thinking that exposure through schooling is the only *possible* way of learning—which explains why people's questions about access often get voiced in terms of exposure.

Ivan Illich has remarked about a subtle transformation in our everyday language whereby verbs are transformed into nouns.²⁵ Nowhere is this more true than in school. Reading, writing, mathematics, scientific inquiry, historical research—all these are properly *activities*. They are things people do. In school, however, through a process of decontextualization for the purpose of instruction, they get turned into nouns; they become subjects and courses that one “takes.” The notion of *doing* mathematics, science, history, etc., gets lost.

²⁴p. 42-43. Van den Berg's suggestion, that children in centuries past could “choose* their profession, is not quite correct. Very often, they had little choice but to go into the “family business,” whatever that was. The social historian Philippe Aries writes, “In medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist; ... as soon as the child could live without the constant solicitude of his mother, his nanny or his cradle-rocker, he belonged to adult society.” See Philippe Aries, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), p. 128. “Ivan Illich, *Too/5 For Conviviality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), pp. 95-99.

It is almost as if Dewey wants to say that one can learn arts and crafts incidentally, but not reading, writing, mathematics, physics, history, geography, etc.²⁶ Is there a fundamental difference between pottery and physics? Why is it assumed that one can learn pottery by hanging around potters, but not learn physics by hanging around physicists? The assumption here points to an insufficient appreciation for the craft-nature of these activities.²⁷ The following is a quote from the theoretical physicist David Deutsch

who speaks of how hanging around a physicist and “participating in the physics culture” is really the only way to learn what *doing* physics means. I shall quote him at length:

What happens if a child of (say) 12 acquires a keen interest in fundamental physics? School will not go far towards meeting such an interest. But even without the impediment of school, if the interest persists he will probably soon begin to exhaust the rewards of learning single-handedly from books ... The point here is not that he will run out of facts to learn: he will not. The point is that factual knowledge from such sources constitutes only a part of what a physicist needs to know. The more important part is a complex set of attitudes and ideas concerning for example, the recognition of what constitute a physics problem, how one goes about solving it, and what might be acceptable as a solution. One can learn such things in only one way: by participating in the physics culture. This is how graduate students learn physics when they are finally permitted to participate in real research. And this—research alongside real physicists—is what I think our hypothetical child should be doing.

²⁶Admittedly, Dewey’s position is more complex than this. He does seem to admit that there are *aspects* of these skills and disciplines that can be learned informally. Certainly he wants to ground learning of school subjects in human experience (as opposed to mere classroom experience). But for Dewey, such experience needs to be designed with the goal of development in mind for it to be educative. He wants education to be a primary task, not an incidental one, as he is not content with the degree of chance in incidental learning. He sees the provision of this sort of direction to experience as one of the principal offices of school; i.e., school is the primary place where “educative” experiences are made and had. (*Democracy and Education*, pp. 18-22, 195-196.)

²⁷There is now a sizable literature on this topic, particularly with regard to science. See Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958, 1962); Jerome Ravets, *Science and its Social Problems* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 75-108; Karin Knorr-Cetina, *The Manufacture of Knowledge: An Essay on the Constructivist and Contextual Nature of Science* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1981); Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Social Construction of Scientific Facts* (London: Sage Publishing Co., 1979).

... How would it work in practice? The guiding principle is that the child *should be productive from the beginning*. He should be working on real problems and not on invented exercises with no purpose other than “education”. The details would be different in different occupations, but let me again elaborate the example from physics. How would a child begin to participate in my own research? Remember first that this would be a self-selected child, one who had already been attracted, for reasons of his own, by the idea of such participation. He may have been fascinated by some of the strange assertion of modern physics that space and time are curved; that the entire universe is continually splitting into many almost identical copies of itself which all continue to exist simultaneously; that one could take a trip to the stars, return, and find oneself younger than one’s grandchildren.

Having read about these theories, he may want to explore them further: What do they mean? Are they really true? Where do they come from? Why do we believe them? How are they connected with everyday experience? Whatever his reasons, he will bring with

him a set of desires and expectations—a set of problems, if you will, which he believes he can set about solving with my cooperation. ...

Quite analogously, I too would have a set of problems to solve: my research topics. What would be in it for me? Well, any complex problem is solved by splitting it into simple sub-problems. There would always be tasks integral to my overall problem which did not require knowledge of physics but only an ability to reason. My capacity to solve the overall problem would be enhanced if I were able to share or delegate such tasks.

Such are the immediate short term benefits for both parties to an “apprenticeship” arrangement: each helps to solve the other’s immediate problems in exchange for help with his own. But if things went at all well, both parties would soon begin to reap greater benefits. We would find that the apprentice’s set of problems was itself changing. He would begin to “think like a physicist” as he unconsciously assimilated inexplicit knowledge simply by observing a physicist solving problems. He would begin to enjoy more and more the inner rewards of doing physics. At the same time he would become steadily more useful to me in an ever wider range of subtasks. Factual knowledge would come to him without specific effort, as a side-effect of pursuing his interests. Later he would begin to grasp the details of specific problems which I was working on, and he would begin to find research topics of his own. ... Finally the apprentice would be such no longer, having overtaken his teacher-colleague in knowledge and skill. This is perhaps the greatest long term benefit which would accrue to both parties.²⁸

Although Deutsch’s example here is a hypothetical one, it suggests that one does not need any preparation other than interest to work with a physicist. He challenges the notion of prerequisites, something deeply ingrained into our idea of learning through schooling; namely, that one must learn *about* physics (or anything else) before one can *do* physics. Dr. Deutsch says outright that wondering about physics problems is not just a preparation for physics—it *is* physics. His description provides a vision of how the craft of doing physics can be learned incidentally.²⁹

²⁸David Deutsch, “How Children Can Become Experts,” in *Growing Without Schooling*, No. 29, October 1982, p. 12.

²⁹As has been mentioned, some of the mathematical learning at *Friskolen 70* has this sort of incidental flavor. The mathematical activities in the ordinary life of the school mostly consist of such utilitarian concerns as measuring, accounting, and the like, as well as the mathematics embedded in activities such as knitting, cooking, music, and various games of one sort or another. But there was only so far they could go: when it came to things like working with equations, fractions, graphing, etc.—that is to say, school math—there was little chance that they could just pick these things up inside the school itself. Or said another way, these aspects of mathematics were inaccessible to them because mathematicians and “mathematics culture” were inaccessible to them. As has been pointed out in Chapter 1, there are no mathematicians (or for that matter scientists) among the adults at *Friskolen 70*. For this reason, the teachers resorted to the series of “short courses” (offered by Niels) for the older children. This was a sort of compromise they were forced to make to cope with the demands of the children’s future schooling. Similar compromises were made with respect to Danish, English, and German. If a child declares no interest in further schooling, then such courses are not necessary. Today, all of the children at *Friskolen 70* continue at other schools when they turn fourteen or

fifteen years old. During the seventies, I have been told, there were a few children who chose not to continue their schooling, and work apprenticeships were found for them instead.

During my stay at *Friskolen 70*, I tried to follow a few individual children on a moment-to-moment basis in hope of capturing how this process of incidental learning happens with subjects such as reading or mathematics—subjects that are thought to necessitate instruction. This proved to be nearly impossible. The children were in motion too much of the time, and there was no way I could follow them in an unobtrusive manner (i.e. without making them self-conscious of their actions).³⁰ So instead of following a particular child, I began to collect anecdotes from several children with regard to how they learned to read.

I noticed right away was that there was no single, monolithic method I could identify. Children learned to read in all sorts of ways. Some children would sit with a teacher (or one of the older children) and listen to a story. Others would occupy themselves with crossword puzzles or matching pictures to words in workbooks that were available. Still others played word games such as “hangman” or perhaps watched some of the other children (who could already read) play them. Other times a small child would go shopping for lunch supplies with an older child and they would read the items on a shopping list together. Then there were many short, fleeting episodes like the one recounted between Clara and Maria at the beginning of chapter 1, that is, younger children asking older children or adults. “What does this say?” And of course some children did all of these things. They did not all begin reading at the same age. Some began at age six; others at age nine. Some few began even later than that.

Though the particularities of contexts of all these instances of reading were different, the basic ingredients were the same: the children had access to a lot of reading material as well as access to people who could read. This is all that is necessary. Necessary, yes, but not sufficient, for a person may have access to these things and still not learn to read. Many things may block a person’s learning, as we noted earlier: fear, anxiety, shame, resentment, alienation—these are the real sources of today’s illiteracy problem.

³⁰It seems the only way to do this, and even then it cannot be done that well, is to live with a child full-time. Such in-depth case studies can thus only be done with one’s own children. See, for example, Glenda Bissex, *GNYS AT WRK: A Child Learns To Read and Write* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981); Robert W. Lawler, *Computer Experience and Cognitive Development* (Chichester, England: Ellis Horwood Press, Ltd., 1985); or for that matter, the works of Jean Piaget, for example, *The Origin of Intelligence in Children*, trans. Margaret Cook, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Some children asked for help when they first tried reading themselves. Some did not seem to need or want help at all. But for those who did ask for help, the assistance came more as a form of emotional support than as “instruction in reading.” The aim here was to minimize just those elements of fear, anxiety, etc., that can slam the brakes on learning.

In *Instead of Education* John Holt describes the sort of asked-for help that Rasmus Hansen provided when children asked to read with him. Though Rasmus retired from teaching at the school in 1980, some of the current teachers—notably Sussie, who works with older children in reading, and Annelise, who reads with some of the younger ones—act in much the same way.

If a child wants some help from an adult, he gets something he wants to read and asks Rasmus Hansen the head of the school, to read with him. The child and Rasmus, a tall bearded man with a deep, soft, slow voice, go to a little nook set aside for this purpose, in the large room where most of the life of the school takes place. The child finds his place and begins to read aloud. For the most part, Rasmus says very little. As the child reads, he makes low noises of agreement and encouragement. If the child reads a word incorrectly, he may (or may not) ask the child if he is sure, or in some way suggest that he take a second look. Very often the child, puzzling out a word, may test a hunch and read it correctly, but without much confidence. He may even ask if he read the word right. Rasmus will signal that he did. Or the child may come to a stop, unable to decide what a word says, but perhaps unwilling to ask. Rasmus will give him time, but he won't let him get stuck or freeze into a panic—these silences may mean very different things for different children. Or the child, if he can't figure out what a word says, or at that moment doesn't want to try to figure it out, will ask what it says. Rasmus will perhaps give hints that will help him to figure it out, or more often, tell him outright. Perhaps they may stop in the middle of reading to talk about something else. When the child has had enough, he is free to leave. ...

In no sense could it be said that Rasmus is “teaching” these children how to read. They are finding out for themselves. What he does do is provide a kind of emotional support while they do this exploring and take their risks. ... The supporting adult tells [the child] by his way of being there that he will not let the child get too lost, too confused, too anxious, will not let him get to the point where he no longer dares trust any of his hunches or intuitions and so can do nothing—the condition of most so-called nonreaders in schools.³¹

These children were learning how to read by reading. The children who wanted this sort of help were using Rasmus and his “grunt method.” as he jokingly calls it. to test out and obtain feedback on their many intuitions and hunches about how words are represented by print. Where do these hunches come from? Most children have already learned the letters of the alphabet (from songs or television shows such as Sesame Street). Often a child will know how to write his or her own name and will also know a small vocabulary of often seen words: STOP, CORN FLAKES, NO. DAD, MOM, TV, etc., plus words read to children in storybooks. From these elements a child can build a type of rudimentary phonics or sound-letter relationships. This may not at first conform to standard orthography, but it is enough to start out with. The point is that one does not need instruction in phonics before one begins to read. Children are able, with enough examples, to build their own phonics.³²

³¹Holt, *Instead of Education*, pp. 76-78.

³²For an in-depth treatment of children's self-made phonology, see Charles Read, “Pre-School Children's Knowledge of English Phonology,” *Harvard Educational Review*, vol. 41 (1971), pp. 1-34; Charles Read, *Children's Perceptions of the Sounds of English: Phonology from Three to Six*, unpublished doctoral dissertation. Harvard University, 1970; G. Bissex, *GNYS AT WRK*, *op cit.* and Carol Chomsky, “Invented Spelling in the Open Classroom,” *Word*, Apr.-Dec. 1971, vol. 27, pp. 499-518.

Seven-year-old Peter was a child in the school who figured out how to read without (at least as far as I could see) this type of help. From time to time I would see him stare off

into space as if in a trance. Sometimes this would happen in the midst of a conversation. I would notice his lips move, and when I followed his gaze, it became evident that he was staring at some word printed on a poster or book or something. I would wait until he finished and then we would resume our conversation. He rarely asked for help because he rarely needed any. Peter was reading! As the year progressed his fluency increased, and within a few months he was reading books to himself. I asked him how he learned to figure out what the words said, and he replied with a very straightforward and honest answer: “I don’t know.”

I do happen to know that Peter comes from a very literate household—his mother is a sociologist and his father a professor of political science—so reading was an everyday activity at home. On the refrigerator at home were magnetic plastic letters. Peter’s parents would read him a bedtime story each night, which he loved. He lived in a “reading culture” and had every reason to believe that he would learn to read and enjoy reading as his parents did. So he must have started to “pay attention” to words, much like a baby pays attention to the rhythms and intonation patterns of speech before it can actually utter words and phrases. That was when his reading started, with that decision to pay attention; though he was probably unaware he was making a decision at all.

I could very well relate to Peter’s reply of “I don’t know” when I asked him about how he learned to read. Part of what makes incidental learning incidental is that one doesn’t really *feel* the learning happening. This was precisely my own experience with learning Danish at *Friskolen 70*. I want to take the time here to reflect on my own learning, on what it felt like to be a learner among this community of people.

Seymour Papert, along with many others, has often referred to the learning of one’s native tongue as the paradigm for learning at its best. Unfortunately, people simply don’t remember how they learned their first language, but here was a chance for me to try to learn a new language as a child does, through immersion in a culture, only I would be aware of the process since I was an adult—or so I thought. And I tried to arrange things so that my experience would be especially childlike. I purposely stayed away from foreign language courses and phrase books before going to Denmark. I arrived in Denmark speaking not a word of Danish, eager to start out on this language-learning experiment. After eight months I became relatively fluent in Danish, though, much to my chagrin, I had very little idea as to how it happened.

At first I could feel myself figuring out individual words, most of which were related to food (eating was a frequent activity). But after the first few weeks I felt myself “figuring out” less and less. Instead I started to absorb whole patterns of speech. I mentioned above that I tried to go about learning Danish in a very childlike way but let me be more specific as to what I mean. I had to suppress the adults urge to want to bring things to a halt the moment I didn’t understand something. I had to force myself, at first, to be content with only a partial or even minimal understanding, and not to let it bother me that I didn’t understand much of what was going on. This is more or less the everyday situation of the child; there is very much that goes over his or her head. Adults or even adolescents are quick to panic as soon as their understanding of something is less than complete. They feel out of control, without bearings, unable to proceed until everything has been cleared up. But it is just this anxious, panic-stricken state that effectively slams the brakes on learning. One reason small children are able to learn so well is because they

generally don't *make an issue* out of whether or not they understand everything right away, as adults tend to do. As was noted earlier, unasked-for help often evokes anger in children precisely because it *does* make an issue out of their incomplete understanding or lack of competence. It could be argued that school, in constantly pointing out, correcting, and grading a child's mistakes, is destroying much of a child's innate ability to learn.

In the same vein, during my entire stay at *Friskolen* 70,1 cannot recall a single instance where a child corrected my Danish (and I must have made hundreds of mistakes). At times, I could tell from the wrinkling of eyebrows (among other cues) when I was not being understood, and that I should try again to make myself clear. Once in a while, one of the teachers would correct me if I said something so outrageously wrong that s/he felt s/he just had to tell me—but this never happened with the children. I also felt much more comfortable speaking Danish with the children—especially the youngest ones—than with the adults. I felt that I could make as many mistakes as I wanted, knowing that they were not “judging my intelligence.” It took me a while before I could feel the same way in the company of adults. Again, it was a question of feeling at ease with myself.

Much like little Peter's “word trances,” I had to tune out all other activities and concentrate very hard on that stream of sound, trying to recognize some of the patterns I knew. For a long while, I could not even eat and listen to Danish at the same time—any distraction was too much. Most difficult was listening to the discussion at the school meetings or teachers meetings. There were no visual cues or actions to clue me in on what were being discussed.³³ This proved to be an exhausting task, and I could only keep it up for a short period of time before I just had to “tune out” from the Danish and give my mind a rest. I remember thinking to myself during some of the early teachers' meetings, “No wonder two-year-olds are often cranky and irritable! They want so much to be a part of the world, to understand all of that adult talk, to do all those things older people do. But it's hard work. It's tiring and frustrating.” On the other hand, conversation relating to food was easy to understand because one could see (and taste) what was being talked about. Likewise, phrases bound to actions such as “*Du kan ikke fange mig?*” (You can't catch me!) had obvious meanings.³⁴ From this sort of foundation I could develop hunches and piece together many other words I heard in conversation. But I could not *feel* myself doing it, nor was I aware of what these hunches were. I only noticed each month that my ability to speak and understand the language was markedly better than the month before.

³³This is one of the chief problems with foreign language instruction in classrooms or language labs. People just sit around and talk or look at printed sentences in workbooks.

There are many points of contact and similarities between my experience with learning a foreign language and Peter's learning how to read. In the same way that Peter was surrounded by printed words and by readers. I was surrounded by Danish and by Danish-speakers. Just as Peter wanted to be able to figure out those strange symbols that somehow contained meaning. I wanted to figure out and make sense of that strange stream of noise that was coming out of everyone's mouths. There were times when I needed help to do this, and on those occasions, I asked for it. Just as Peter would ask “What does that say?” I would ask “What does that mean?” or “How do you pronounce this?” But most of the time, I did not need such help. Though learning a new language in

this way was often tiring, it was also thrilling and exhilarating. For both Peter and myself, a new aspect of the world was opening up. It is difficult to put into words the joy that I felt, the thrill of learning under one's own powers, learning without being taught, learning through living. I could feel for myself what the children around me must feel very much of the time, and I began to realize where all the vivacity of the place came from: the act of extending one's powers, of realizing one's own potential, of becoming oneself.

³⁴See Ludwig Wittgenstein's discussion of "language games," in Wittgenstein, *The Brown Book* (Oxford; Basil Blackwell. 1958), pp. 81-86. Also, Charles S. Hardwick *Language Learning in Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971).

Conclusion

The Quality of Life

The most important condition for the development of love of life in the child is for him to be with people who love life.

— Erich Fromm

IT HAS BEEN MY GOAL THROUGHOUT THIS STUDY to raise issues surrounding the social context of learning. To aid this task, I have used *Friskolen 70* as an "object to think with," as a generator of themes, much in the same way that Seymour Papert used the Brazilian samba school to talk about the same topic. True. I could have engaged in a sort of armchair philosophy and raised themes in the abstract, but I believe the ethnographic character of this work contributes much to the depth—to the thickness—of these issues. By referring to concrete events in the lives of real children, abstract terms such as structure, trust, authority, community, culture, relationships, play, freedom, access, etc., take on deeper, richer meanings.

Let us now, by way of summary, review some of these issues and the path we took in encountering them.

Starting from a discussion of computers in education, we examined some of the assumptions underlying education, teaching, and learning that was the source of "technocentrism." i.e., giving centrality to a piece of technology instead of to people and cultures. The key concern here was the question of *agency*: Who is the agent? Who is really in control? A central claim was that when agency for learning is placed outside the learner—whether in a teacher or a machine—learning suffers. The distinction between asked-for and unasked-for teaching pointed to same concern. Unasked-for, uninvited, unwanted help is disabling help. Education, in so far as it means doing things *to* people, similarly places learning in jeopardy. This led us to identify learning, not with teaching or education, but with *living*, i.e. with the opposite of alienation. Discussions about the quality of learning are thus transposed into concerns about the quality of life. In this sense, the social context of learning becomes permuted to the social context of living. It was at this point, and for this reason, that we focused our attention on a particular human community engaged in the art of living: namely. *Friskolen 70*.

Our discussion of *Friskolen 70* was framed by three categories: structure; authority; and freedom. These were certainly not the only categories that could have been chosen, nor do they in any sense tell the "whole story" of *Friskolen 70*. Even a very thick book

would not accomplish that. But these three categories surely rank among the ones that have generated much confusion and are consequently ones that could most stand a more detailed consideration. The confusion I'm referring to here arises when an observer carries assumptions (and thus expectations) of conventional school into an environment such as *Friskolen 70*. The depth and richness is simply missed, and what's left is thin description, which yields only a surface-level understanding of what's going on. As Clifford Geertz points out, unless one knows the social code for winking, winks have no meaning, no significance, and, in fact, cannot even be said to "exist."

... [Between what Ryle calls the "thin description" of what the rehearse (parodist, winker, twitcher...) is doing ("rapidly contracting his right eyelids") and the "thick description" of what he is doing ("practicing a burlesque of a friend faking a wink to deceive an innocent into thinking a conspiracy is in motion") lies the object of ethnography: a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures in terms of which twitches, winks, fake-winks, parodies, rehearsals of parodies are produced, perceived, and interpreted, and without which they would not (not even the zero-form twitches, which, as a cultural category¹ are as much non-winks as winks are non-twitches) in fact exist, no matter what anyone did or didn't do with his eyelids.¹

¹Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*

An aim of this thesis has been to lay bare the "stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures" (the successive layers of interpretation ranging from thin to progressively thicker descriptions) that enable one to make sense of the activity taking place at *Friskolen 70*. Let us now review the various "social codes," the ways in which structure, authority, and freedom take on a particular shape in, and give meaning to, the life of the community.

If structure is taken to be the set of rules, codes of behavior, rewards and punishments, curricula and lesson plans, which are imposed on school children, then it is understandable that observers come to view *Friskolen 70* as an "unstructured" environment. The notion of structure we developed, in our attempt to describe *Friskolen 70* more thickly, highlights the structural forms inherent in meaningful activity, not superimposed upon it. We saw that elements of this inherent structure were to be found in such things as the quality of human relationships, the form for consensual decision-making (the school meeting), the many forms of activity (i.e. what people actually did), and other practices or "rituals" adopted to promote and maintain the smooth functioning of the community. The activity we saw, if at times noisy, was purposeful and meaningful. Various modes of growth and development—intellectual, social, moral, physical—nourish in the context of what otherwise look like quite ordinary activities: arts and crafts, games, lunch preparations, music, drama, sport, cleaning, chatting, reading, play, budgeting and accounting, trips, meetings, and the rest of it. This is the stuff of community life.

Another thin way of talking about *Friskolen 70* describes it as totally anti-authoritarian, as a place where grown-ups "abandon" their adult authority. Here authority is equated with pulling rank and giving orders, rather like military authority. But this way of talking ignores a deeper sense of authority—one based on such things as skill, competence, experience, knowledge. Viewed in this way, authority becomes something one *invests in* someone else, not something one uses *on* someone else. We saw how

authority in this sense was a key element of the “organic structuring” of community life, yet at the same time we saw how precarious this balance was how sensitive children were to manipulation and arbitrary decisions made over their heads. Indeed, children are powerfully attracted to people who have special skills, people who can do things, who know things that are important to them. But this magnetism erodes when authority-of-competence is used on children or is used to entertain them.

Finally, freedom—in all its complexities—takes on a more immediate form in a place like *Friskolen 70*; it must be confronted head on. Though we admire freedom greatly as a slogan in political speeches, most of us have little contact with it in practice. Are we really free? To what extent are our wants and needs shaped by our environment. How can we tell? These are among the issues that come to the fore when considering a free environment for children. When it is said that free schools are bad because they give kids too much freedom, it typically means that freedom has become confused with “absolute freedom” or license, and thus it becomes a frightening, threatening concept. Indeed, deeply rooted in our culture is the notion that people must be compelled, molded, and shaped to be good, otherwise they’d be bad or lazy or worse—if they could choose, they’d choose bad things. But here *Friskolen 70* acts as a sort of counter-example: in an atmosphere of trust and where they have real opportunities for engagement with the world, children *are* active, *are* curious, *are* social—without the use of coercion, seduction, manipulation, bribe, or threat. We saw how essential it was to establishing authentic human relationships that the children had freedom of choice—including the right to refuse, to say “no”—within the limits of the freedom/license distinction, i.e., the dialectic or give-and-take between the right to be oneself and the rights of others to be themselves. Such freedom also made it possible for teachers to obtain honest feedback from children and thus truly to help them. But this “freedom from” would have left a vacuum of free choice were it not balanced and supplemented by “freedom to,” by *access* to people, places, tools, books ... to culture. And it is precisely through access, not exposure, to culture, through trying many things, meeting people, going places, etc., that people are able to realize themselves, to find out who they are, and to find their true work.

It may seem to the reader that we have strayed a long way from issues relating to computers in education, which was, after all, the starting point of this discussion. But the way I see it, we have not strayed very far at all. The fundamental issues in the computers-in-education debate do not have to do with computers *per se*. Computers (or, for that matter, tools in general) open up a new range of *possibilities*: new things can be done, or old things can be done a new way. This is their true importance. But I see a lot of these possibilities—at least, the ones that I see as desirable—stifled in schools, because schools are entrenched in old ways of doing things. Moreover, their entrenchment has little to do with the technology they are using; it has to do with the society the schools fit into and the values of that society, which the schools reflect. Instead of the school culture using the opportunities provided by the new technology as a means for radical questioning, I see a lot of assimilation going on—assimilation of the computer culture to the school culture. Let us recall again Papert’s vision of the computer used as a tool *by* children.

In many schools today, the phrase “computer-aided instruction” means making the computer teach the child. One might say the *computer is being used to program* the child. In my vision, *the child programs the computer* and, in doing so, both acquires a sense of

mastery over a piece of the most modern and powerful technology and establishes an intimate contact with some of the deepest ideas from science, mathematics, and from the art of intellectual model building.-

The radical demand here should now seem clear. Papert is demanding that schools do a total about-face, that they become anti-schools. For a child will not get very far in programming the computer in any thick sense of the term within an institution *whose very purpose is to program the child*. Schools do not at all look as if they are about to budge from their course and become anything like the sort of human community I have been describing here, and I believe it is wrong to think that *the computer* can act as a lever that will budge them.⁵ But Logo is certainly pliable enough to be shaped into curriculum objectives, workbook exercises, and classroom assignments. Logo will become—and is becoming—another nuance of the school game; perhaps a much, much better nuance than filling in ditto sheets or taking tests (as James Herndon discovered), but a nuance nonetheless.

In the Preface, I stated that I was not proposing *Friskolen 70* as a blueprint or model for the “ideal school.” (Nor was Seymour Papert proposing that everyone start dancing to Brazilian samba music.) I want to take the time here to clarify and delineate my reasons for adopting such a stance, though I have in fact referred to them, albeit obliquely, throughout the text.

Firstly, my aim has all along been to raise issues regarding the social context of learning through constructing a thick description of a particular community of adults and children. Why? It is my hope that, by looking at *Friskolen 70*, readers will at least stop to consider whether what they are now doing or supporting in the name of education is in fact a good thing to do. *Friskolen 70* provides a powerful, contrasting image of how things could be. Its very existence speaks more powerfully than even the most caustic critique of public education (and we have enough of those already); again, it is a powerful object to think with.⁴ This might be the beginnings of a radical questioning—the raising of a sort of “critical consciousness,” to borrow Paulo Freire’s terms—of the ways we bring up children in the world and, indeed, of the type of world we are bringing them up into. Such critical consciousness is the first and necessary step that precedes any sort of social change.

Secondly, places like *Friskolen 70* do not come into existence just because some researcher says they ought to. They emerge from concerned people acting from their own deeply felt and shared values. Moreover, it must be said that the United States is not Denmark, and there are many elements in our society, in our political, economic and social structure, that are in contradiction with the socialist/libertarian/anarchist values and concerns that underlie *Friskolen 70*. Denmark provides far more in the way of fertile soil for a small subculture like *Friskolen 70* to take root and to grow: a long-standing tradition of supporting, both ideologically and financially, alternative educational endeavors, and a tradition that holds that the upbringing of children is essentially a private affair.⁷ To be sure, the parents and teachers who started the *Bagsvaerd Ny Lilleskole* were critical of many elements of their society (as are the adults associated with *Friskolen 70* today), but I feel the dissonance and the odds against success are even greater in this country. Most of the schools in the U.S. that start off more or less (and it is usually less) like *Friskolen 70* die out after a few years, either due to lack of money, ideological disagreements,

teacher burnout, or other reasons.⁸ Our society is far too success oriented, far too worried about outcomes and measurements and “excellence” and being Number One to trust children enough to let them learn through living. We are too ready to sacrifice the free spirit of the child on the altar of academic achievement.

Lastly, and most importantly, I do not propose *Friskolen 70* as an “ideal school” because there are important ways in which it falls short of anything I would call ideal. As a human community, *Friskolen 70* has many attractive things about it, as I have described, but all the same, it must be acknowledged that a school—any *school*—is necessarily a *vastly limited society*. There is only so much culture one can bring into a school. The teachers try to address this by making the boundary between the school and the larger society as permeable as possible: by taking many trips, by offering the children various types of apprenticeships in the working world, and by being very relaxed about school attendance itself. But it is not enough. Even these sorts of opportunities pale before what the society at large, the whole culture, has to offer. Said another way, *Friskolen 70* is not ideal because *school itself is not ideal*. John Holt voiced similar concerns in a newsletter at the height of the American free school movement:

I do not think we can treat as separate the quality of education and the quality of life in general. ... I am saying that truly good education in a bad society is a contradiction in terms. In short, in a society that is absurd, unworkable, wasteful, destructive, secretive, coercive, monopolistic, and generally anti-human, we could never have good education, no matter what kind of schools the powers that be permit, because it is not the educators or the schools but the whole society and the quality of life in it that really educate. This means that whatever we do to improve the quality of life, for anyone, and in whatever part of his life, to that degree improves education. More and more it seems to me and this is a reversal of what I felt not long ago, that it makes little sense to talk about education *for* social change, as if education could be a kind of getting ready. The best and perhaps only education for social change is action to bring about that change. The best and perhaps only way to prepare the young to work for a better world is to invite them, right now, to join us in working for it. We cannot say, “We will concentrate *our* efforts on making nice schools for you, and after you get out you can tackle the tough job of remaking the world.” Nor can we define ourselves as Good People whose task it is to defend children from All Those Other Bad People. There cannot be little worlds fit for children in a world not fit for anyone else.

Once again, I am not saying what people so often say to me— “We must change society before we can change the schools.” I am saying that society is the school; that men learn best and most from what is closest to the center of their lives; that men being above all else looking, asking, thinking, choosing, and acting animals, what men need above all else is a society in which they are to the greatest possible degree free and encouraged to look, ask, think, choose, and act; and that making this society is both the chief social or political *and* educational task of our time.

For this very reason, a society that would allow its schools to become more or less like *Friskolen 70* would not want schools (i.e., holding places for children) at all no matter how nice they might be, and would do away with them. Such a society would want to make itself into a place that is open and accessible to people of all ages.

And so, in the end, the issues raised in this work are really about society, and not about schools. This is in accord with my characterization of *Friskolen 70* as a “human community” instead of a school. *Friskolen 70* can provide an image, albeit an incomplete one of what Ivan Illich has called a “deschooled” or “convivial society/” It can provide a portrait of how learning happens in the stream of life, how adults and children can relate to each other, and live, learn, work, and play together.

I choose the term “conviviality” to designate the opposite of industrial productivity. I intended it to mean autonomous and creative discourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment; and this in contrast with the conditioned response of persons to the demands made upon them by others, and by a man-made environment. I consider conviviality to be individual freedom realized in personal independence and, as such, an intrinsic ethical value.

... A convivial society would be the result of social arrangements that guarantee for each member the most ample and free access to the tools of the community and limit this freedom only in favor of another member’s equal freedom.

... What is fundamental to a convivial society is not the total absence of manipulative institutions and addictive goods and services, but the balance between those tools which create the specific demands they are specialized to satisfy and those complementary, enabling tools which foster self-realization.

... A convivial society does not exclude all schools. It does exclude a school system which has been perverted into a compulsory tool, denying privileges to the dropout.

This last point warrants further explanation. Illich does see a place, in his vision of a convivial society, for places like *Friskolen 70*, that is, club-like places where children might want to meet other children and do things together. But such places, like playgrounds or libraries, would simply be *resources* that children could use as much or as little as they liked. They would not have to use them, nor would they be judged by how much (or how little) they used them. In Illich’s language, such a resource place would be a true “convivial tool.”

We have already mentioned in passing a spectacular example of such a convivial tool. This was the Pioneer Health Centre in Peckham, England (a suburb south of London). It was a sort of *Friskolen 70* for the entire family, a “family club.” as it was called. In general, the model of a community center is a promising one, though the ones in existence today tend to be vastly underused and underrated resources. Such places could be greatly expanded from the entertainment role they currently serve to something more along the lines of the family club in Peckham: a meeting and doing place, a place where tools and the knowledge and skill that go with them are accessible to all, a place where learning is not separate from living, I see such places as playing an especially vital role for children of the urban poor (to say nothing of their parents), who are perhaps hurt the most by school and who have little recourse to any sort of a rich life outside of school. As we noted in the beginning, this is just the sort of role played by the samba schools for many of the poverty-stricken and politically oppressed people in Brazil.

While a place such as *Friskolen 70* would make for a valuable resource for children (and, to be sure, for adults who enjoy spending time with children), there is much that can be done outside of any sort of institutional spectrum to facilitate meaningful engagement

with the world. A very small but growing movement in the United States is the home-schooling movement, factions of which share many of the values that underlie *Friskolen 70*. The late John Holt, who first informed me of the existence of the *Bagsvaerd Ny Lilleskole*, devoted the last eight years of his life to writing and speaking about home schooling, and promoting it as an option for families who were upset with what schools were doing (or would do) to their children.

¹¹ See Innes Pearse and Lucy Crocker, *The Peckham Experiment* (London: Alien & Unwin, 1943); and Innes Pearse, *The Quality of Life* (Edinburgh: The Scottish Academic Press, 1979). The Centre operated from 1926 to 1950, interrupted by the Second World War.

A portion of the home-schooling movement¹³ is comprised of people who wish to free themselves from reliance on various institutions, institutions—such as schools, hospitals, law firms, etc.—that they see as no longer serving desirable purposes. These are people who in general try to practice a living philosophy of self-reliance: many, though certainly not all, of them make their own clothes, grow their own food, build their own houses, have strong environmentalist leanings, and practice home birth and breast feeding, in addition to home schooling. They are people who want to gain a greater amount of control over their lives, over the quality of their lives. They are true do-it-yourselfers, true deschoolers. They are not content to wait around for someone to provide them with a convivial society; they want to start making one right now.

I mention these two routes for action—development of community centers and home schooling—as possibilities for social change in the United States, social change that can occur “in the cracks,” as Susannah Sheffer (editor of *Growing without Schooling* magazine) has put it.¹⁴ This seems to me to be the most promising course of action that can be taken by readers who view the issues raised here seriously: who believe that children don’t need to be made to learn, and that what children need most of all is access to the world and to the lives of adults and other people around them, a chance to see what really matters to those adults, and a chance to join them, to the extent that they are willing and able, in their work.

¹²I must confess that I am not at all happy with the name ‘home schooling.’ When ‘it’ is done well, in my opinion, home schooling does not occur principally at “home,” nor does it resemble “schooling.” I prefer the locution, “growing without schooling,” which is also the name of the magazine/newsletter established by Holt in 1977.

¹³The majority of the people who practice home schooling—there are no precise statistics—do so for religious reasons; they are not principally concerned with libertarian values.

¹⁴Private correspondence. It is interesting to note that a comparable growing-without-schooling movement has *not* caught on in Denmark. This may be due to the fact that Denmark

Friskolen 70 is indeed a powerful object-to-think-with. Clearly they are doing something right. After spending eight months in their midst, I must say that what impressed me the most was the sheer vivacity, the energy and vitality, that one could practically feel radiating through the place. This is what lies at the very heart of *Friskolen*

70, this is what makes it work, this is why the children learn so much and so well: they are so much alive and in love with life.

The person who loves life is attracted by the process of life and growth in all spheres. He prefers to construct rather than to retain. He is capable of wondering, and he prefers to see something new to the security of finding confirmation of the old. He loves the adventure of living more than he does certainty. His approach to life is functional rather than mechanical. He sees the whole rather than only the parts, structures rather than summations. He wants to mold and to influence by love, reason, by his example; not by force, by cutting things apart, by the bureaucratic manner of administering people as if they were things. He enjoys life and all its manifestations rather than mere excitement.¹⁵

For me, this says it all. Isn't this what we want for our children? Isn't this what we want for ourselves?

Appendix A

Historical notes on the circumstances leading up to the formation of the Bagsvaerd Ny Lilleskole

Den Lille Skole (literally. The Little School) was one of the first Little Schools to appear in Denmark; a country with a long tradition of sponsoring alternatives to the public school system.¹ Established in 1949, *Den Lille Skole* was a reaction against the authoritarian, German-style school with its mass-production, indoctrinating techniques. Denmark had been occupied by Germany during the Second World War and got a taste of how the Germans used the schools as instruments for molding and shaping young people to accept and embrace the ideals of the National Socialist Party. Some of the founders of *Den Lille Skole* were themselves active in the Danish Resistance during the war. They were determined to rebuild their crippled society by providing their children with the resources to cultivate self-actualization as well as individual and social responsibility, thereby averting the “sheep mentality” and blind obedience to authority that were the main ingredients of the human catastrophe during the war.

Influenced by the writings of John Dewey and A. S. Neill, as well as by the older Danish influences of N. F. S. Grundtvig and Kristian Kold (founders of the Danish *Friskole* movement) a group of parents and teachers gathered together in a suburb of Copenhagen to build a primary school based on democratic principles, with many opportunities for children to engage in constructive, creative, and collective activities. This was *Den Lille Skole*.

¹ Unlike the United States, there is no official separation between church and state in Denmark. The state religion (Evangelical Lutheran) is taught in the public schools. Recognizing the conflicts this presented to religious liberty, Denmark created laws very early on (1814—the same year Denmark instituted compulsory school attendance) to provide public funds for alternative schools. See Estelle Fuchs, “The Free School? of Denmark,” *Saturday Review*, August 16, 1969.

However, toward the end of the summer of 1969, a new critical consciousness developed within a faction of teachers at *Den Lille Skole*. Amidst student uproar, the creation of the intentional community of Christiania, protest against the war in Vietnam, and a general questioning of authority that was in the air, the teachers and a few parents

at *Den Lille Skole* gathered together to form a discussion group to address the topic “The School in the Year 2000.” It was an attempt to take a critical look at where the school had come from and where it was headed—where it might be in the year 2000.

The upshot of the discussion was that, though *Den Lille Skole* “was a good, nice school, in reality it had not come a step farther than the nicer public schools.”¹⁷² Despite all the project-oriented work, the arts and crafts, the small class size, the democratic talk, etc. they were still in the business of *education* like all the other schools. Children were still divided up into classes according to age, and what went on in those classes was still for the most part decided and designed by the teacher for the purpose of *educating* the children—teaching them what they felt they ought to know.

That same year, 1969, had seen a number of changeovers in the teaching staff at *Den Lille Skole*. The presence of several newcomers provided an excuse to start from the bottom, as it were, and reanalyze the current structure of the school. As Kirsten Schonemman put it, “We were beginning to speculate whether it wasn’t just plain wrong that we divided children up according to age level. We thought it would be a good idea to try to break up the old classroom-based structure.

A weekend retreat was planned at a cottage in Sweden for the purpose of reestablishing the goals of the school, and then evaluating its current form in light of these goals. The owner of the cottage, as it turned out, was Aase Hauch—one of the original founding members of *Den Lille Skole* twenty years earlier—who related some of the original ideas behind the school. In summarizing the events of the Sweden trip in *Den Lille Skole’s* monthly newsletter, Willy Schonemann wrote.

In order to bring the teacher group together and to continue the still-not-concluded goal-setting debate, the teachers took a trip (Sept. 20-22, 1969) to Drude and Hauch’s cottage in Sweden.

It is not an easy matter to give a satisfactory picture of our “dust cloud.” because the work was so concentrated and the experience of being a group was so strong—among other things. “[My description] will very easily become a faint reflection of what really happened.

We whipped together a work schedule that didn’t leave much time to enjoy the grandiose Swedish countryside. But the care Aase Hauch showed us as hostess alleviated some of the pressure.

Saturday afternoon, we threw ourselves out into a complex of problems about objectives in programmed instruction. If we hadn’t already obtained an understanding of the meaning and elaboration of the stated goals by Saturday evening, we got it during Sunday, where we, through practical tasks, practiced [it] with each other. The discussion around these exercises shook up our usual mindset and pulled us into a debate on the school’s structure and our pedagogical attitudes.

Sunday evening, we hurled ourselves into a more direct debate on our rather rigid structure by analyzing:

- age-separated classroom structure.
- subject periods of 50 minutes duration.
- same teacher has the class through 7 years.

- same subjects for all children in the same grade.
- subjects placed discontinuously in the schedule.
- parent-run school, parental pressure, parental influence.
- class size.

We had long and troubling debates, in small groups as well as in assembly. It was therefore totally liberating to be presented with the school's original objectives that lay hidden in Aase's account of the school's beginnings 20 years ago. That it also became the gathering's strongest challenge was not odd, when one compares the school's present form and content with these folder] objectives. The child's play = the child's learning?

I come to think about two things in connection with [Aase's] account: Jens Jacob's contribution during his tenure on the steering committee, when we talked about the school of the future, and where he, among other things, thought that teachers of the future would sooner be used as friendly counselors [*trivselsaedagøger*] than as instructors. And a rejoinder from a student at E... School a few years back: "If only the school were more like a recreational club and the recreational club more like a school." The sentiment in favor of taking our current structure up for revision was strong. The present norms were evaluated critically and many were, I dare say, discarded. But we didn't reach [the point] where we set new ones in their places. We suspected there was another, better structure, but we were not able to bring it into form.

Monday morning, we were supposed to untie the knots and find ways for our re-, er... evolution [pun intended], but since we didn't reach our goal Sunday evening—the new school had been lost in the fog—couldn't do anything other than realize that the time was too short and the practical problems too large (scheduling, subject and time allotment, financial matters, etc.). But we ascertained that we had come together as a working group, and therefore look forward to a year where the opportunities for a more child-appropriate structuring around our objectives can be created.

Some further details ought perhaps to be filled in here to provide something of an informed background to these debates and discussions. The last year or so at *Den Lille Skole* had witnessed a growing unrest among many of the children, especially in the third grade. The children could not be "controlled. They would stay outside and play instead of coming inside to attend their lessons. Or they would rudely insult their teacher and play various types of practical jokes in a rather mean-spirited way. Unlike their American counterparts, the Danish teachers could not use the conventional carrots and sticks—test and grades—to bribe or threaten the children into submission. (Testing and grading generally does not occur until grade eight in Denmark. Primary schools like *Den Lille Skole* consist of children through grade seven.) So to get the children to attend class and to do the work, teachers must try to make their classes interesting enough so that the children want to attend. This generally makes for better classes in some sense, yet it also involves a fair amount of psychological manipulation and turns the teacher into something of an entertainer or performer. Also teachers in Denmark rely heavily on parental involvement in their children's schooling to make sure children keep up with their lessons, much more so than in the United States; thus a certain amount of pressure comes from the home. However, the very fact that things were no longer working gave the debates on structure a particular sense of urgency.

After many more planning meetings and discussion groups, it was decided that those individuals interested in a major structural change should present a full-blown plan to the next general assembly meeting. Toward the end of February 1970, another Sweden trip was planned, though this time only five teachers attended: Lis Holm, Rasmus Hansen, Willy and Kirsten Schonnemann, and Erik Guldbsek. The split had already begun.

An Open Plan School

At the second meeting in Sweden, the group of five teachers decided to concentrate on two major structural changes: (1) incorporating across-age “home groups” instead of age-determined classes; and (2) creating an elective or “choice-oriented” school in order to move away from the authoritarian control held by the teacher in the classroom. They felt that putting children of the same age into one classroom was artificial and bureaucratic, and ultimately harmful to a child’s development. The “home group” idea would resemble the more basic unit of the family. The important element of *choice* was key to realizing the school’s goal of producing responsible citizens who would take initiative and who could make decisions. They wanted to move away from *having children do* what the teachers thought was important, to *allowing children to decide for themselves* how they were going to use the school.

The following schema was drawn up by the “Sweden group” (as they came to be called) to illustrate how a home group would stack up against the current home classroom structure:

Home Class versus Home Group

Home Class Has a structure created to make the teaching easier.

Home Group Has a structure that is created out of being together, and that makes *it* easier.

Home Class Has children who are set within a defined structure.

Home Group Has children who can be together and create a structure for themselves.

Home Class Has children who must cooperate.

Home Group Has children who cooperate.

Home Class Has children who stay together through seven years.

Home Group Has children who can stay with each other over seven years.

Home Class Has limited possibilities for emotional bonding with people in the same phase of development.

Home Group Has many possibilities for emotional bonding with people in various phases of development.

Most conflicts are resolved by the adult who is rather distant from the content of the conflict.

Home Group Most conflicts are resolved by children who are rather near to the content of the conflict.

Home Class One looks to the adult to get help.

Home Group One looks to the group to get help..

What they were proposing was not merely an “open classroom” along the lines of the British Leicestershire model, but really an *open plan school*. They realized that the issue of physical space would be important for such a goal and therefore proposed that a plastic roof or possibly even a geodesic dome be built over the large, open courtyard outside *Den Lille Skole*.

According to Rasmus Hansen the debate in those days was centered on whether one should create a school according to ideas of “learning theory” (i.e. psychological theories on how children learn, such as those of Piaget or Bruner) or whether one should make a school by creating “a nice environment to be in” (where “nice” would be defined by the community as a whole). If the environment is a good one the Sweden group reasoned, then learning would “look after itself.” In later years (A place to be, where one can learn) was to become something of a slogan for these five pioneering teachers.

It was to be several more months, until May of that year, before the five teachers of the Sweden group found out how unpopular these ideas were with the rest of the staff as well as with a portion of the parents. It was as though a time bomb had been ticking all through the debate. On April 30, 1970 a vote was cast at the school’s general assembly with barely half of the members attending.

The proposal of the Sweden group—elective school with home groups—passed by a narrow margin, 45-42. However, some members of the school’s steering committee were unsatisfied with the way the vote turned out and scheduled an “extraordinary general assembly” meeting for May 21. The time bomb went off.

A vote of “no confidence” was cast against the school’s headmaster, Rasmus Hansen, resulting in 66 votes against Rasmus, 60 in favor, with 6 abstentions. In the days that followed, the resignations of three of the four members of the Sweden group were called for. The school was effectively split right down the middle into two camps. After many angry letters containing personal overtones, if not blatant attacks, it became clear that the members of the Sweden group could not profitably continue working at *Den Lille Skole*. Finally on July 3, 1970, a group of parents met with these outcast teachers to discuss the possibility of creating their own school.

Three weeks later, the new school gathered together (they numbered 42 children then) to take their first *lejrskole* trip. Meanwhile, a committee of parents was busily trying to find a building to house the school. This was not accomplished, however, by the time the children and teachers returned from *lejrskole*, but one family offered their private home as a temporary locale until a permanent one could be found. As luck would have it, they found space in a factory building just a few doors down on the same street. The space was currently being rented out to a *gymnasium* (college-prep, academic high school) which occupied more space than they needed. They rented a large, long room that was halfway underground. About the same time, one of the parents had made contact with a truck driver who was driving loads of wooden beer cases to be dumped. (The breweries were changing to plastic cases.) They received between two and three thousand of them free of charge. These beer cases became chairs, tables, bookshelves, walls, toys....Thus was created the *Bagsvaerd Ny Lilleskole*.

Appendix B

Framework Resolutions

The following is a translation of a document outlining what the teachers call the “framework resolutions” (*rammebeslutninger*) of the school, parts of which have already been quoted in the text of this thesis. I reproduce them here in their entirety from a document dated March 1974 and titled, “The School’s Pedagogical Structure.”

The School’s Pedagogical Structure Comments

Both before—and especially after the break from *Gammellosevej*—we had a lot of discussion?, between us teachers as well as between parents and teachers. Much of this occurred as dialogues and exchanges of thoughts about pedagogical structure, without our being committed to it as a manifesto, since we harbored as our main point of view: The school that we will make should not be based on our previous norms and traditions and notions of what a school should be like; we should begin from the bare bottom and build something in harmony with what children want and need. But from old minutes [of these early meetings] we can pick out a number of citations and formulations that we discussed publicly with the entire parent group, which were dealt with more or less at house-meetings, parent meetings, and as such may be viewed as *framework resolutions* concerning pedagogical structure. Several of these resolutions evolved over time from minutes from the teachers’ end-of-year meetings and the like, and some resolutions were borne out of discussions at house-meetings. A large part of the framework resolutions are reproduced in the brochure that is given out to new parents.²

Even though we still maintain that we wish the school should be constantly developing and must not stagnate due to norms set in concrete, we can at the same time make it clear that the school’s main course or direction follows these framework resolutions, which were agreed upon at a very early point in time, and that essential changes [to them] should be submitted at the house-meeting for adoption or rejection.

Citations

“We will make a school for children, together with the children and not make decisions over the heads of the children.”

“We will create a stimulating environment that provides possibilities for further development of such qualities as curiosity, critical sense, activity, experimentation —a milieu that stands and falls on the trust between children and adults.”

“The school will enable the child to be aware of his own capacities and abilities. He shall have the freedom to involve himself in things that interest him, in harmony with other people.”

“The children shall decide for themselves what they shall learn, when, and how.”

“The school is the children’s society, which they themselves build up, together with the teachers.”

“The teacher’s role is to be a part of a stimulating and inspiring milieu. He should help the children realize their own decisions, not make decisions for them.”

Framework Resolutions

- The school has no grades or fixed groups; work is done across age levels and according to interest.

- The individual child has the right and duty to manage his or her own school time. The teachers have the duty to help them in accordance with their level of development. The greatest weight is placed on the individual's personal and social development.
- The school offers instruction in basic skills, environmental studies, and practical and musical subjects (workshops).
- The school is the children's society, where they can experience how one can establish one's own humane society, and how one can exert influence and change the development of a society.
- The school meeting (children, teachers, and others at the school) is the highest authority in the school's daily life, where all problems can be debated and resolution? can be made about all matters that concern the community.
- The school meeting hires and dismisses guest-teachers.
- The school meeting plans, together with the teachers, the annual *lejrskole* trip.
- The school meeting administers, together with the teachers, cleaning and maintenance work at the school.
- New beginners are admitted to the school at various points of the year, when they are judged ready to begin.

Appendix C

Friskolen 70 at a Glance

The following is a translation of a brochure that the teachers at *Friskolen 70* give to prospective students and their families. It shows how they describe themselves to others. This document was prepared in February 1988, and it appears to me that they have deliberately toned down the radical character of the place in this description so as to attract more students. In recent years, they have been having more and more trouble finding families who want this type of place for their children. Like most of the rest of the world, Denmark has grown more conservative in the 1980's and it appears that the Little School movement is gradually dying out.

Friskolen 70

The School's History

The school was started in 1970 by children, teachers, and parents who had worked together at another school. The school was called the Bagsvaerd New Little School because it was located in Bagsvaerd.

Our starting point in those days was that we should make a school together with the children.

The school was housed in a rented locale and, since its ten-year renting period ran out the school had to find another place to be.

In 1980 the school bought a rather dilapidated factory building. After several years of great effort by all—parents, children, teachers, as well as craftsmen—we have succeeded to live well under one roof.

The Physical Premises

The school's large room (approx. 400 m²) is where most of the school's activities take place. The large room is partitioned by movable walls/shelves/boxes.

Little Reading Nook. The smaller children meet here every morning for topics, reading, and arithmetic.

School Meeting Nook. Here is where the whole school can meetings, discuss things, make rules, and much other things.

Topic Nook. For subjects or topics.

Sewing Workshop.

Painting Nook.

The Kitchen. Used every day to prepare the lunch, which can also be hot food.

For rhythemics we have a separate gymnasium.

Isolated from the large room is a wood and metal workshop, as well as a music room.

Beside these premises we have a front building, which, among other things, is used as an office and caretaker's workshop.

All in all, we command over 1500 m².

Everyday Life

Friskolen 70 has 60 students of ages 6 through 14 years, corresponding to grades 1-7.

- We teach in teams according to the individual child's level.
- We weigh the child's physical, intellectual, and social development equally high.

This is carried out by:

- Rhythemics/Movement
- Ordinary School Subjects
- School Meetings and Common Cleaning.

Rhythemics/Movement

The children have 3-4 hours of rhythemics per week. The subject contains exercises and play, which strengthens and differentiates motor development.

The individual child's development is followed and discussed.

Ordinary School Subjects

We teach all ordinary school subjects [Danish, Mathematics, English]. This is done partly through various topics and partly through short courses.

School Meetings

The School Meeting is the highest decision-making authority. The meeting is held daily, and all children and adults participate.

Here is decided everything that touches the school's daily life and future, such as, for example, formation of subject groups, resolution of conflicts, and things affecting the school's physical and economic framework.

Common Cleaning

The children are divided into teams and attached to a teacher. These teams take care of everyday cleaning, as well as preparing food.

The Workshops

The school has a wood workshop, a sewing nook, and a drawing/painting nook. Here work is done to develop the children's craftsmanship and creative abilities. Music and drama teams are established regularly, where the children work with various forms of dramatic expression.

Parent Collaboration

Parents are always welcome to follow daily life at the school, and we are happy when they become regular visitors to the school. We arrange annually:

- 6 meetings for everyone.
- 1 parents' weekend.
- 2-4 work/maintenance Saturdays.
- parent conferences on request.

Practical Information

School Fees. School fees are 550 kr [\$80] per month.

Food Money. 80 kr [\$11.50] is paid per month for lunch at the school. The children should bring this money with them and pay the fee themselves at the school.

Payment for Trips. When the school holds holiday trips or *lejrskole*. 30 kr [\$4.25] is paid per day.

Books. Are free of charge.

Withdrawal from School. Should happen on the first day of a month with one month's notice, though not on June 1 and July 1[^] as the school year runs from August 1 to June 31.

School Doctor. We have together with Lundehus School, and the health visitor from there comes here to the school.

Office Hours. The school secretary's working hours are between 9 A.M. and 3 P.M. (Not on Wednesday.)

The School Year

A school year contains, besides the daily school routine, some regular occurrences:

- formation of cleaning teams.
- *lejrskole*.
- apprenticeships.

Cleaning Teams

New cleaning teams are assembled every year before the summer vacation.

Lejrskole

A school year begins with a *lejrskole*. The *lejrskole* stretches out over ten days and is divided into two stages. The first half consists of smaller groups formed according to interest: bicycle trips, farm trips, hiking trips, sailing trips, etc. Thereafter, everyone meets at the common *lejrskole* site, where the children stay overnight with their new cleanup teams.

Apprenticeships

Each year, apprenticeships for the older children are arranged:

- school apprenticeships.
- social apprenticeships.
- work apprenticeships.

end